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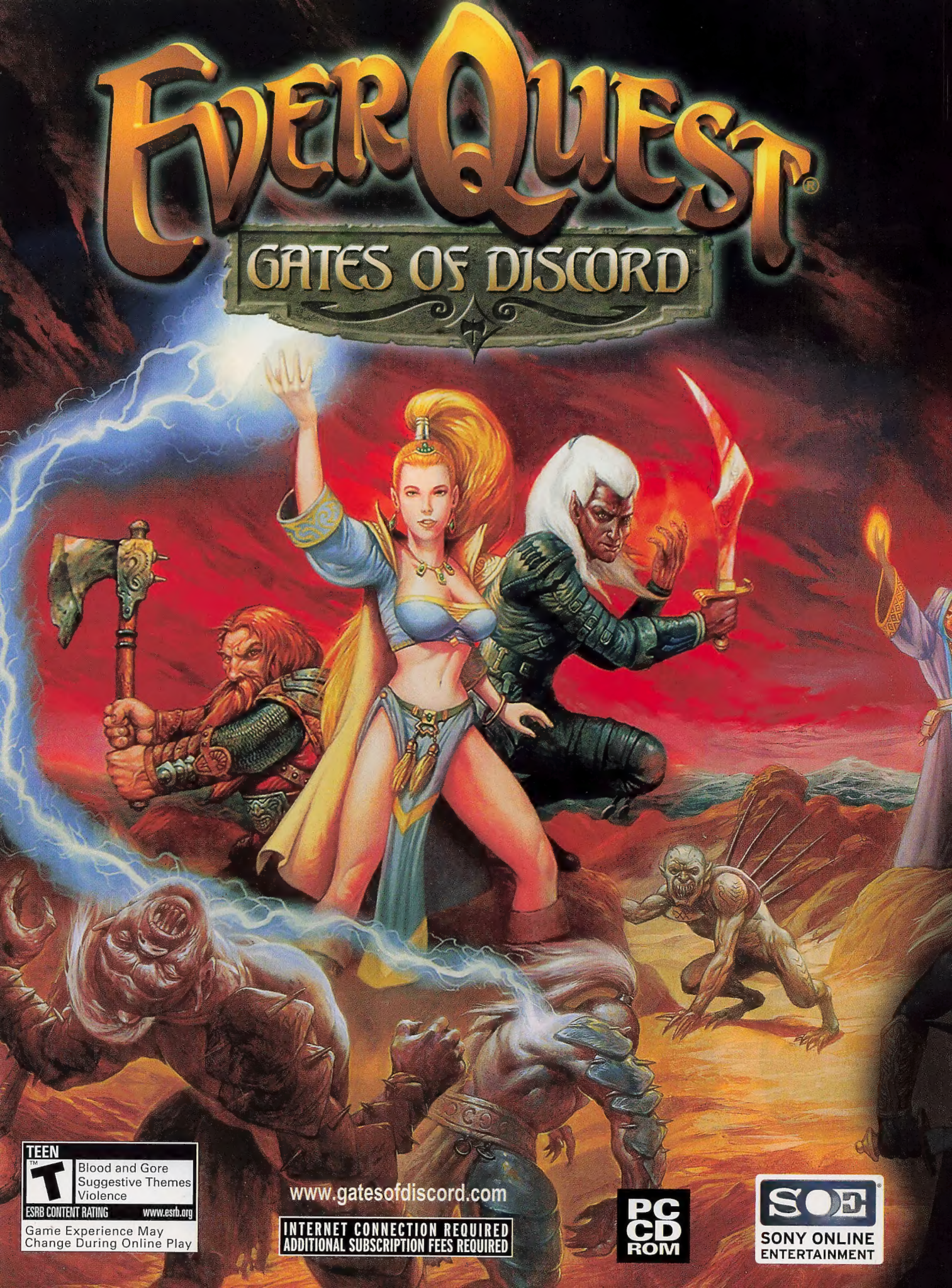
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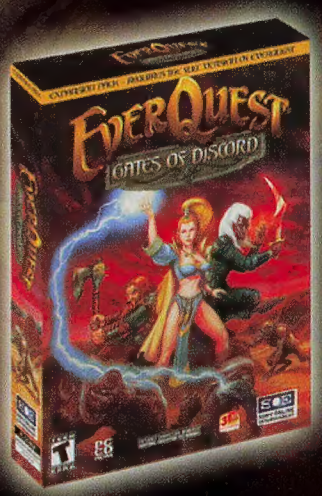

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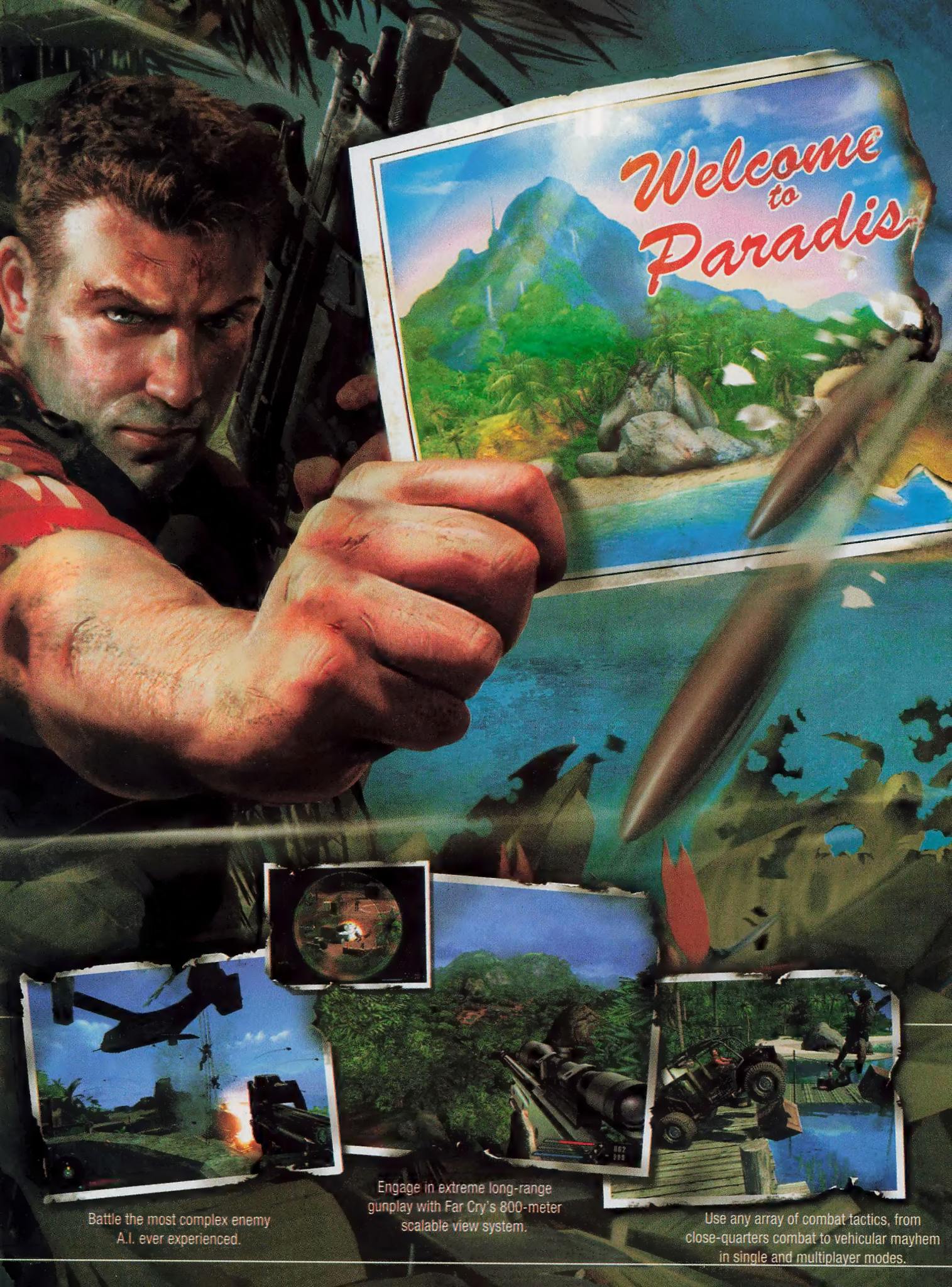

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18 Editorial
Our editor-in-chief likes muscular guys in tights and rubber masks. Shouldn't someone tell his wife?

20 Letters
OK, here's the deal. If we get one more letter complaining about the January DVD, we are going to put the entire magazine on a DVD every month, just to piss you off more. Got it? Great.

30 Radar
Between sending each other video clips of strippers, Darren and Wil managed to see some cool gadgets at **CES.** See their cleaned-up story on page 30. We've also got early looks at **True Crime** and **The Movies** and an indelible image of **The Sims 2**. Plus, we bring you details on the huge **Unreal** and **Max Payne** mod contests and an exclusive interview with Hall of Fame designer **Jon Van Caneghem**, who reveals how 3DO nearly destroyed his once-renowned franchises.

48 Previews
Star Wars is going commando—**Republic Commando**, that is. Watch as we once again scoop the competition with a close look at this stellar first-person shooter. Besides a healthy helping of screenshots and exclusive info, we also have previews for upcoming sleepers **Sacred** and **Soldiers**—and a whole lot more. Check it!

COVER STORY

Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich

Two things that go great together: superheroes and Nazi hunting! For the follow-up to their award-winning strategy game **Freedom Force**, the superpowered game designers at Irrational Games are going back in time with a tribute to the Golden Age of comics. We sent evil overlord Robert Coffey to Irrational to get us the full exclusive scoop.

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80 Reviews

Is it us, or is this year's postholiday letdown even more soaked in the bitter tea of disappointment than usual? Who boxed up all the skunk spray? Oh, it's not all bad—but when you get to wade through underwhelming console ports like **Magic: The Gathering—Battlegrounds**, unmitigated dreck like **One Must Fall: Battlegrounds**, and the awful **Terminator 3**, it's hard to cling to the will to live. If it weren't for a few quality expansion packs and the excellent **Silent Storm**, we might be swinging from a rope.

96 Tech

Best Tech section ever! We review **ASUS' Radeon 9800XT**, a killer system from **CyberPower**, three sets of speakers, and **Dell**'s vaunted gaming laptop, the **Inspiron XPS**. Of course, there's also a new How To, Cracked Case, Wil Power, and Tech Medics.

111 Check Out

If this section were about all the lousy things in the world, it would be called Chuck Out. Thankfully, Check Out is about things that ROCK!

126 Scorched Earth

Time for an intervention.

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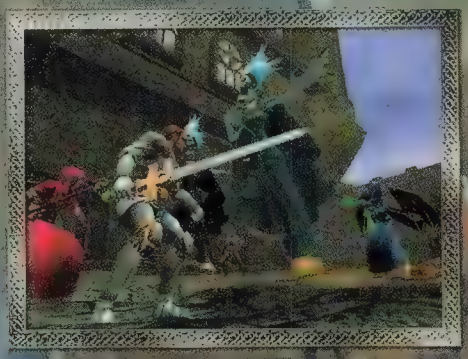

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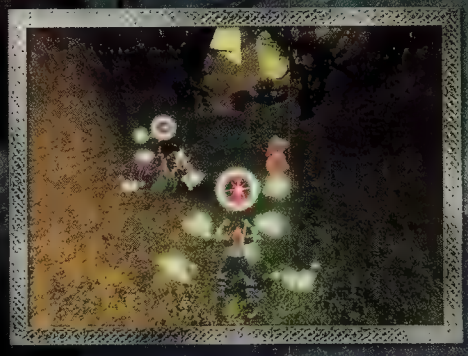

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A man who likes men in tights

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

If there's one thing I get even less respect for than being a grown man who plays computer games, it's being a grown man who reads comic books. Though I largely kicked the habit through my late teens and 20s, I later picked it up again with a vengeance once I had actually fooled the woman who is now my wife into marrying me. With that out of the way, I was able to abandon the half-hearted, pointless attempts at being cool and mature, and to re-embrace my inner dork. Good-bye, pretentious, beret-wearing, Berkeley know-it-all! Hello, Batman!

I forgot what I was missing all those years. Yes, most comic books are lame, just like most movies, TV shows, CDs, and game magazines are lame. But in the hands of great writers and artists—Alan Moore, Kurt Busiek, Stan Sakai, Jeff Smith—comic books can be as fine a medium for storytelling as any. And having to feel guilty and embarrassed for liking such work, while the rest of the country medicates itself nightly with idiot shows like The Bachelor, is frustrating, yes, and part of the ongoing price we pay for being geeks. You want to fit in? Go to Europe or Japan.

KEN BROWN
EDITOR

The man behind the curtain. The power behind the power. The guy who keeps the ineffectual puppet known as Jeff Green afloat. Something of a publishing Swiss army knife, Ken Brown does a little bit of everything at the magazine, including and especially trimming Darren Gladstone's back hair.

KRISTEN SALVATORE
MANAGING EDITOR

Kristen Salvatore spent two weekends completely inebriated in Las Vegas this past month, but, maddeningly, that didn't stop her from continuing her new Reign of Terror at *CGW*. Turn in your stuff, make your deadlines, write your stories—blah blah blah. Yeah, whatever, Kristen! Hello!

ROBERT COFFEY
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Outside, he is a rather normal looking guy. A family man. A publishing professional. Inside, however, is someone you don't want to know. Someone creepy. Someone scary. Someone who plays as women in online games and talks about his "boyfriends." He's an anonymous Internet transsexual.

DARREN GLADSTONE
PREVIEWS EDITOR

No one works it like Gladstone. We're not talking about the way he sashays through a room. We're talking about his ability to schmooze, score exclusives, and get every new piece of cool technology absolutely free under the guise of "work." Plus, the ladies inexplicably love him. They don't get much more annoying than that.

WILLIAM O'NEAL
TECH EDITOR

He has a roomful of the most powerful PCs on the planet, tricked out with fast processors, state-of-the-art videocards, and gigantic flat-screen monitors. And what does he do with all that? He plays Yahoo Dominos. All day. Hey kids, would you like to be *CGW*'s new Tech Editor?

JOHNNY LIU
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Johnny Liu may look like a nice guy. But here's one thing you didn't know about Johnny Liu: Every single bone in his body is registered with the FBI as a lethal weapon. Well, maybe not every bone. The point is, he's a tough guy, that Johnny Liu. And you can't stop saying, Johnny Liu.

RYAN SCOTT
CD-ROM EDITOR

Ryan Scott may be the hardest working man at *CGW*, which is both sad and ironic given that he's the only one on the staff who doesn't actually get a salary. Nope. Just chicken feed. And the occasional free game. And not even the good games either. The lousy ones, like *Trailer Park Tycoon*.

ROB SCHULTZ
ART DIRECTOR

Some people are word people, and some are picture people. Rob Schultz is a picture person who knows a few words, too. Words like, "Where the hell is the staff box? It's two weeks late." Sorry, Rob—we've been busy answering hate mail from people pissed at you for putting black text on red backgrounds.

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

Remember the cool surfer turtles in *Finding Nemo*? Michael is like those turtles. He's just that cool. Well, most of the time. Just don't give him your phone number, because he's likely to call it at 4 a.m., drunk out of his mind, and babble incoherently for minutes on end. Which is not so cool.

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Letters

How about we call him a fat, over-the-hill has-been instead?

In the March 2004 issue, what's with the caption accompanying the picture of William Shatner in the article by contributing editor Tom Chick about the first Gen Con in Southern California? Referring to Mr. Shatner as an "aging, loopy sci-fi TV star" seems a bit inappropriate in this type of magazine. What does *CGW* stand for anyway—Crucify Geriatrics World? Stick to what you do best (supposedly). You know, it's the games, stupid.

A. Wilkinson

All salute the Northern Brigade!

When I was reading the machinima article in your February 2004 issue, I noticed a FATAL error! You included a screenshot of the video "Hero," which won the award for Best Sound, along with the following caption: "Many gamers participated in 'Hero,' which was filmed on a standard *Battlefield* server."

The word "gamers" is your biggest mistake. These gamers were all in fact members of an elite *Battlefield* clan called Northern Brigade. I myself am in this clan and would like for you to recognize our great achievement.

NBrigade|Hornet

Done.

Hey, at least Vin Diesel didn't play Sauron

Thank you for these quotes from two *LOTR* game reviews that perfectly describe the movies for anyone who truly loved the books [February 2004]:

"What we have here is a textbook case of glorious buildup and shattered expectations."

"Check your brain at the door for this sword-swinging, spell-slinging good time."

If only Peter Jackson had understood the characters and the fact that Tolkien was not writing an action flick. :-(

Eric Hill

Since we were stupid

Hi, *CGW*. I've written you a lot before; you've just never printed my letters. I liked your article on machinima in your February issue. I just have one question: Since when was *Quake* released in 1986?

Otherwise, great issue. Your review of *KOTOR* was right on. A lot of people on forums think it's overrated, too Xboxy, or that the controls are bad, but we all know they're a bunch of meatbags.

Zack Green

Err, yeah. We meant 1996. Thanks, Zack. The editor responsible for that oversight has been shot.

More DVD love and hate

I just want to say thank you for January's DVD. I just finished playing *Deus Ex* and had a blast. Please keep up the great work on the magazine, and if you decide to give us gamers more free games in the future, I will love you for it. (Ahem, *System Shock 2* and *Panzer Elite* would make excellent choices...hint, hint.) A hearty well-done and good job to Ryan Scott!

Richard

I just read the Letters section in the March issue. Your reply to the reader who liked the DVD was amusing. So he was the only one who liked it. Well, when I and probably many others subscribed to your magazine, checked the CD box, wrote the check, and sent in the order slip, fools that we were, we expected to receive 12 CDs. Maybe, just maybe, some of us don't have a DVD drive—that could be why we were not happy with it. All the cool and nifty games in the world would do us no good if we didn't have a DVD drive. The fact that I didn't receive one of the CDs I paid for isn't the problem, it's your attitude that we should be grateful to get the Special Edition DVD full of free games that are completely useless to us.

I really like your magazine. The CDs are just an extra bonus as far as I'm concerned, but the fact that not everyone is happy getting the DVD in place of the expected CD should come as no surprise to you.

L Curley

CGW, I love you guys, but you made a critical error that I thought I was the only person dumb enough to fall victim to. I was feeling really dumb until one night, while reading your February 2004 issue, eating frozen pizza, downloading from Kazaa and IRC, and listening to Korn, a letter from madglee caught my eye. The disc with the full games on it was a DVD disc, not a CD like usual. Of course, I was one of those people who put it in my CD-ROM drive and found it to be empty. Disappointed and a bit angry, I threw the disc across the room and returned to *Warlords Battlecry II*. Did you guys really

Sizzlin'!

Re: Tracy Espeleta in The Nerd Herd section. "There is much room for more innovation in the game-design aspect of PC games. Developers blah blah blah.... A mainstream audience...blah blah...."

You're a hot Asian girl fondling an oversized cookie. What was that about innovation?

Steve

Nerd Herd regular Tracy Espeleta responds: I'm honored you even noticed my picture, despite there being a half-naked chick on the next page, but what about Johnny Liu's picture? Asian guy fondling an 8x8...now THAT'S hot.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL JENNINGS

Mail Bites

Is it just me, or are FPS games getting shorter? I can't remember the last time I spent more than two weeks on one.

—Voltaire

Is it just me, or does the picture of Ken Brown in the February issue look like the hair stylist from *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*?

—Reilly Stephens

expect lazy computer geeks to realize and figure that out it was a DVD disc? I think you guys are giving us a little more credit than we really deserve.

Any chance next time you guys can make some REALLY BIG BOLD LETTERS saying "DVD" on it for us poor, pathetic, monitor-glued geeks with ADD?

JeeNz2069

The triumphant return of Daniel DeFord

Yeah, so I open my new *CGW* on the can today, and while I'm reading it, I notice the last letter in your Letters section (under the heading "Another One Bites the Dust") is mine [February 2004]. First, let me say thanks for this great honor. In the seven-plus years I have been a subscriber, I've never been put in your mag before.

But, while that's all well and good, I can't help but notice YOU GUYS TOTALLY CUT ME OFF! I mean, you guys cut the last 10 or so sentences! And to make matters worse, YOU DIDN'T PUT MY NAME ON IT! How can I brag to all my nerdy friends if you don't put my NAME on it?

I really hope that this oversight isn't why the delicious Dana Jongewaard was fired—it's OK, she can come back! Oh, and attached is a copy of the entire e-mail, in case you want to reprint it or something, but lost the original copy.

Daniel DeFord

Again, we blew it. Here is Daniel's original letter, in all its glory:

I waited for over a month for this *CGW* disc that was supposed to contain the full version of *Deus Ex*. I've always wanted to play this game, and I thought this disc would be my chance. When I opened it, I was all, "Screw these other games, I need to play and beat *Deus Ex* before *Deus Ex 2: Invisible War* comes out next week!'

Boy, was I ever stupid.

I pop the thing into my CD-ROM drive, only to realize: IT'S A GODDAMN DVD-ROM. I stared in disbelief at the <Drive not accessible> pop-up on my screen. I honestly felt like crying.

Why, *CGW*? Why, after my eight years of faithful subscription and love? Why, after I continue to support and prefer computer gaming to my Xbox, despite the fact that my PC is a 450MHz dinosaur from 1999 that I bought simply to play one of your games of the year, *Unreal Tournament*, did you do this to me? Why, oh God, why?

Daniel DeFord

And our original answer to you: Because we hate you, Daniel.

It's not a letter, it's an infomercial! Yay!

Your magazine has done many things for me in the past. It has given me good reviews and previews, made me laugh out loud and even cry (*Half Life 2* isn't coming out as scheduled?!?), but now it has taught me a lesson in life.

I have always been a terrific procrastinator; in fact, there aren't many out there who can say that they're better at procrastination than I am. But from this day forth, I will no longer procrastinate! Every month, as soon as that damn subscription card falls out of the pages of my newly bought magazine, I see the money that I should be saving, wince, give a good Homer "D'oh!" and decide that I'll just fill out the card and send it in...tomorrow.

Well, I just got home from the newsstand with my February issue of *CGW* and found that someone had pilfered the demo CD. I would take the issue back for another, but it was the last one at the stand, and I still want to read the issue this month. I think I'll send in a subscription card...tomorrow.

Michael McLean

The hunky stud is named ...Scooter

When I opened my February *CGW*, I was shocked to read that you lost Dana to *Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine*! I'm sure the public outcry has been intense. I mean, c'mon! First you lose Scooter...OK, fine, I'm over it. But Dana?!? DANA?!?! She is way too cool (and way too hot) to lose. What's the problem here, Jeff? Is there some hunky stud down the hall that lured her away? Were you not paying her enough? This is indeed a tragic moment for all the male readers. No more pictures of Dana or guest reviews by Dana or delusions of grandeur that I could marry Dana.... (Oh wait, that last one's still a go.)

Anyway, from now on, Jeff, you'll need to use whatever means necessary to keep any hot chicks (i.e., Kristen) on staff: bribery, extortion, groveling, or combinations of these.

Phil Nguyen

Hell is other people

I've been a PC gamer for about 10 years and faithfully read your reviews and previews. One frustration I have is that, since I have no interest in online gaming (even though I have broadband), I really don't care much about MMOFPS/RPGs or whatever...and sometimes I can't tell from the article if a game is only multiplayer or both. My question is about your latest feature article on *MOH: Pacific Assault* [February 2004]—the article's main focus is on the multiplayer aspect, but nowhere is it stated that there is or isn't a single-player component. Can you help me with this? I'd be really bummed if it's going to be multiplayer only.

Robb S.

Like the original *Medal of Honor, Pacific Assault* will have a complete single-player campaign.

Bruce Geryk—Satan?

Having introduced me to the crack-laced, chocolate barbecue potato chip cuisine that is *Dominions II: The Ascension Wars*, I hold you completely responsible for any ill effect on my graduate work this year. I've slept four hours in the last two days because of this game. Bruce Geryk, may you burn in hell.

Eric Schwartz

Department of Corrections

In our February 2004 issue, both *Railroad Tycoon 3*, published by Take-Two Interactive, and *Dominions II: The Ascension Wars*, published by Shrapnel Games, received review scores of 4.5 stars, thus entitling them to *CGW*'s Editor's Choice awards. Here's the award. We're sorry. Please don't hit us.

"100 percent Ben Affleck–free"? Isn't that Ben on the cover of the February 2004 issue furiously trying to shoot down his career and kill his life with a double-barreled J. Lo?

—Harold Minkwitz

Please find out how to make the day last 26 hours. With my busy life, I no longer have time to play games as much as I did.

—Robert

What's the "m" word? Mommy?

I know—this letter should have been written a year ago. In your October 2002 Letters section, a Mr. Draco claimed that *Fallout 2* was the first game to use the "m" word. You agreed with him. I remember an even earlier game that uses that "m" word several times. Remember *Leisure Suit Larry 6*? Talk to the foul-mouthed woman (Peggy?) and she will say that "m" word several times in a row.

Anyway, keep up the good work.

Vincent Lao

Dude. It's just a game about trains

Many times I've thought about mailing in to tell you what a great mag you've got, but you already know that and enough people do it anyway. So I'll gripe instead. What is up with the lousy *Railroad Tycoon 3* review [February 2004]? Did this guy even PLAY *RRT2*? All the things he thinks are so great you can do in *RRT2* in the advance economic model. You can buy industries along your route, manipulate the stock market, suspend the dividend, etc. His tip: Buy your stock before you issue stock to the public. Horrible tip. Yeah, OK, if you're desperate, do this. It'll help, minutely. Better yet: DO NOT ISSUE STOCK! It's one of the worst things you can do in the market.

Send me the damn thing and I'll do a proper review about what's actually changed in the game. One of the things that's supposed to have been changed is the ability to PLACE industries along your line. Not to have them dictated to you by the scenario. This was completely left out of the review. It was, however, in your "preview." And, NO, I'm not fishing for a free copy. I'd gladly go out and buy one if you'll print the review I write. Maybe mine will do somebody some good—seeing how I've actually played the previous versions. Geez....

Jeff Herter

Quality control

I've been a subscriber to your excellent rag for some time now, and I've never had an incentive to write. Until now. Your February issue was the *Contract J.A.C.K.* of the redesign that should have been *NOLF2*. January's issue was great. But some flaws reared their ugly heads with the February issue. A missing letters page, the comment on page 26 that machinima began in 1986 (a year before the original *SimCity* was released), and recommended system specs of "None" in game reviews for *Chrome*, *Railroad Tycoon 3*, and others surely disappointed. And how come no Editor's Choice symbol was given for 4.5-star reviews of *Railroad Tycoon 3* and *Dominions II*? I know it was a month of transition for you guys (and your new managing editor). But please, keep your eyes open for these kinds of blunders. Otherwise I'll weep bitterly. And no magazine wants a weeping subscriber.

Jonah B.

It was indeed a rough month. We blame the holiday eggnog. And Scooter. He doesn't work for us anymore, true, but that rat bastard must have done something wrong.

System Shock 2 love

I have been long awaiting the moment when I would finally write to you guys. All that I would like to say is thank you for putting *System Shock 2* in the Hall of Fame. But that's not important. What's important is that I strongly believe that this is the scariest game of all time! When I first played, I couldn't sleep at night without seeing the tormented hybrids or hearing the haunting voice recordings. I would hear things as I wandered into dark rooms. I actually slept with a real wrench to stave off my nightmares. Never has a game so truly frightened me so terribly. I still scream when I round a corner, only to encounter a hybrid. Or worst of all: the terrifying arachnids. Those buggers scared me the most. I would always run from those guys, shooting them with my rifle on full auto, not stopping till I had to reload. They got scarier in groups.

All future horror games shall be judged by this single game if they want to prove worthy. And they better stay scary for the umpteenth time, like *SS2* does. Now I must go back into hiding, lest Xerxes send the scary things at me some more.

Blue Berry Pie

Mail Bites

What dumbass thought it was a good idea to put black text on a bright blue background? Gives me a headache trying to read it. Blech!

—Wags

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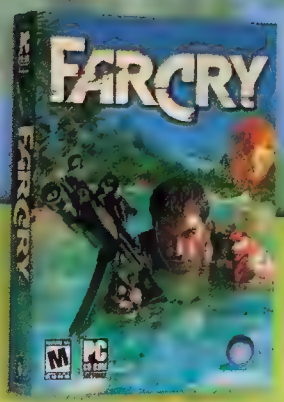

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FIELD TRIP

2004: The Year of the Gear

Gaming gadgets proliferate at the Consumer Electronic Show in Vegas

Inside

True Crime
A *GTA*-inspired console game brings multiplayer mayhem to the PC.

Max Payne Mod Contest
There's a badass PC and other cool prizes up for grabs.

JVC
A rare interview with the Hall of Fame designer who got 3DO'd.

The $400 APEXtreme could bring PC games to the masses.

What's to be gained from six long days in Las Vegas? Either a massive migraine or a massive hangover—or, in our case, both, plus an acute case of gadget envy, since we were there to report on this year's Consumer Electronics Show.

Newfangled consoles?

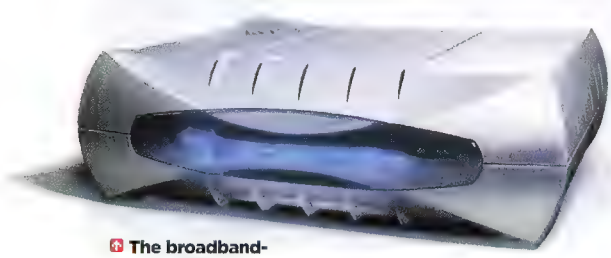
Since this is a consumer electronics show, gaming stuff usually takes a backseat. But hidden away at one of the smaller booths was a set-top console that turned a bunch of heads in the consumer crowd. Apex Digital's APEXtreme (www.apexdigitalinc.com) has a lame name, but represents an interesting concept: the ability to play PC games on the TV in your living room. However, a ton of hurdles could keep this $400 device from being successful. Will the 1.2GHz CPU and 256MB of RAM be enough to play a game? Can the 128MB videocard really perform up to the standards of ATI's embedded Radeon 9100 series card? Hell, most new games require at least 1.8GHz CPUs to be even remotely playable. Using the DISCover chip and a stripped down version of Windows XP Pro means faster performance, according to the folks at Apex. We just don't have any info on how much faster.

What we can tell you is that it looked fine playing *Madden 2004* on a regular TV set. And for those craving all the fun of PC-game patches, the deck promises to make your life a little easier. With a live Internet connection (broadband or dial-up) that hooks up to GameSpy Arcade, the deck will automatically update drivers and install patches for free. Basically, this looks like a budget-friendly way to sneak casual gamers into the PC fold. And while Apex Digital is master of all things budget (you see its DVD players for sale at Wal-Mart for under $100), Alienware is apparently going to take the high-end approach by offering a similar device with top-notch components in its own DISCover-based box.

What seems more promising, though, wasn't even haunting the show floor. We stumbled upon Infinium Labs' Phantom console in a hotel on the Strip. More surprisingly, we had a chance to actually play *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* on the device. In a nutshell, it's a networked box that doesn't accept disc-based media—it pulls everything off a broadband Internet connection. The unit will cost between $300 and $500, according to Infinium's James Roberts. What you'll get is a sophisticated rig featuring a heavy-duty AMD CPU, 1GB of RAM, and a GeForceFX 5700, although these specs may change in the final version. Infinium will likely make its money not from the device itself but from a monthly subscription to its game-downloading service. Infinium has a new senior executive who may change some of the unit's features and pricing, but they still expect to ship units by year's end. The real question is what games will be available for the system?

Don't want to set up shop in your living room? Then set up Designyard's torture device, the Gamedeck (www.thegamedeck.com), wherever your gaming rig hides. "All that's missing from this thing is the ball gag" was our first reaction when we passed it on the show floor. Composed of solidly built industrial metal welded together and pimped out, it even has metal supports that swing open so you can strap into this geek cockpit. Once you sit down, though, it's pretty comfortable—ergonomic even. It should

All that's missing from this $6,000 torture device is the ball gag.



The broadband-powered Phantom doesn't take discs.

Gamedeck: The ultimate geek cockpit.

The Zen Portable Media Center plays downloaded video content. Yes, naughty stuff, too.

We finally saw serious attention being paid to the idea of adding a PC to your home entertainment system.

be, considering it costs as much as $6,000. Like a freakish life-sized Transformer, the keyboard trays can push back to make room for optional flight sticks and steering wheels mounted on arms that pull down and lock into place. If you're this dedicated to your gaming, get outside and breathe some fresh air every once in a while.

The PC won't be ignored!

Personally, we're sick and tired of hearing about convergence. But finally, at CES we saw some serious attention being paid to the idea of adding a PC to your home entertainment system. Dell, HP, and Gateway all made splashes with various media center PCs. While the idea of the media center PC isn't new (Gateway tried it years ago with its ill-fated Destination system), technology has improved, prices have dropped, and the big PC makers are hoping the time is right.

Essentially, media center PCs are machines that enable users to do standard tasks, such as Internet surfing and e-mailing, as well as TiVo-like DVR tasks. Each manufacturer seems to be taking a different approach, with Gateway offering what appears to be the widest selection of products. The company's 610XL (pictured here) is an all-in-one setup, and its FMC-901 is designed to fit in a standard audio-visual cabinet.

Easily the sexiest gadget we saw was Creative's Zen Portable Media Center. Basically, the PMC is a 6-by-4-inch handheld device that allows users to view downloaded video content, like TV programs from a media center PC, ripped DVDs, or...ahem, adult content. As a nice bonus, it also handles Windows Mobile Software and boasts USB 2.0, and the version we saw has a whopping 20GB of storage space: With that, you can view up to 80 hours of video on the 320x240 3-inch screen or listen to up to 5,000 songs. We've gotta wait till the fall to get our hands on this one, but at least we can start saving up the $400.

All in all, CES 2004 left us feeling good about the future of technology and gaming. The PC seems stronger than ever, and as the mysterious silver box becomes a more integral part of your entertainment setup, we have no doubt that the games will continue to flow. **Darren Gladstone and William O'Neal, with additional reporting by Ivan Sulic of www.1up.com.**

Gateway's 610XL is an all-in-one entertainment system for games, music, DVDs, and video recording.

Reality Check

How the ratings stack up among the gaming press

GAME	CGW	PC Gamer	CGM	GameSpot	IGN.com	GameSpy	1UP.com	GameRankings.com
Beyond Good & Evil	A	n/a	n/a	B+	A	—	B	B+
Deus Ex: Invisible War	C	B+	n/a	B+	A	B+	B-	B+
Lords of EverQuest	C	n/a	C-	C	C+	D	D-	C
Need for Speed Underground	A	A-	B-	B+	A	B+	A	B+
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time	A	n/a	n/a	A-	A-	B+	A+	A

"...the must-have strategy title for any organized crime enthusiast."
— GameZone
"...gamers will be blown away... once you get into this game, you can never quit!"
— PC gameworld.com
"...its mixture of RPG and strategy elements is sure to appeal to the aspiring Don in all of us."
— UGO.com
"Think of this strategy game as The Sims meets The Sopranos."
— Playboy Magazine
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RECON

True Crime Wave

The GTA-like game that helps take a bite outta crime comes to PC

You can unlock fighting abilities as you go through the game.

Hmm, where do you suppose this move came from?

The response to Activision's console game *True Crime: Streets of L.A.* hasn't been exactly unanimous. Some of our sister publications dismissed it as little more than a *Grand Theft Auto* clone, while the vaunted Spike TV awards honored it as Best Action Game of 2003. Well, love it or hate it, the game is coming to the PC, and, unlike Rockstar's thug-life opus, Activision is putting some honest-to-God thought into the PC port of this game.

For those who aren't familiar with it, True Crime is inspired by the likes of the Lethal Weapon movies. You roll through 240 accurately mapped square miles of L.A., blasting through a branching story line replete with criminals, informants, and thugs. As you bust crime and heads in the streets, you unlock new fighting, shooting, and driving abilities. the game also features top voice acting talent from Christopher Walken, Gary Oldman, Michael Madsen, Michelle Rodriguez, Mako, and more.

While we don't know how many control issues will be solved for the PC, and we can only hope that the bugs will be ironed out, we're really looking forward to a multiplayer mode. That's right, there will be multiplayer mayhem on the streets of L.A. with five different modes. Using either GameSpy or a LAN connection, up to four players can play any number of ways. For example you can play "Fast and Furious" style, racing through L.A., or you can patrol the city looking for trouble in "The Beat." There's also the promise of unlockable skins of "Activision All-Stars" and new weapons, according to producer T. Quincy Jefferson. While we didn't get a chance to kick the tires for ourselves, count on more updates on this interesting crime-buster before it ships late in 2004.

Darren Gladstone

Phase 1's winning mod, *DeathBall*, proves that sports and carnage mix pretty darn well.

Robots and explosions abound in the anime-styled *Jupiter Effect*.

Conquest Marines is a team-oriented, objective-based mod with plenty of fun weapons and vehicles.

UNREAL!

$1,000,000 Mod Contest

Make a cool Unreal mod, get a $350,000 game engine

Unreal addicts and mod makers, rejoice. Nvidia, Epic Games, and Atari have teamed up to present the mother of all mod contests: the $1,000,000 Nvidia Make Something Unreal Contest. Designed as a way for resourceful groups and individuals to showcase their creative talents, the contest promises a whopping $555,000 in cash prizes, 100 fully decked-out AMD-powered PCs, and a fully licensed copy of the *Unreal* Engine (a $350,000 piece of software) for the grand prize winner.

"The main reason [for the contest] is to encourage the new and continued development of great *UT 2003/4* mods," said Mark Rein of Epic Entertainment. "This means our game customers get more value for their purchase, because all of the mods entered in the contest can be downloaded and played for free if you already own *UT 2003/4*. We also want to help draw attention to those mods and the people who are making them."

The contest is divided into several phases; the first two phases have been completed, with two additional phases and a round of grand finals to follow. The winning entries are being showcased at the official *Unreal Tournament* website (www.unrealtournament.com) and Nvidia's nZone gaming site (www.nvidia.com/nzone), and you just might see a few of the finalists on future *CGW* demo discs.

Think you've got what it takes to win? You'd better get cracking—the deadline for phase 3 contest entries is April 30, 2004. And keep in mind that you'll face some stiff competition. Epic Games lead designer Cliff Bleszinski (better known to Unreal fans as CliffyB) had this to say about the response thus far: "The quality of the mods we've received has been no less than stellar. Mods such as *Face-Off* and *DeathBall* are composed of top-notch content."

Check out the full contest rules on the web at www.unrealtournament.com. **Ryan Scott**

Top 5 Downloads

The best money you'll never spend

Kick-ass mods for Battlefield 1942

1 Desert Combat
DESERTCOMBAT.COM
Transforms the game into a modern-day masterpiece.

2 Eve of Destruction
PLANETBATTLEFIELD.COM/EOD
A stunning Vietnam War total conversion.

3 Forgotten Hope
FORGOTTENHOPE.BF1942FILES.COM
Loaded with istorically accurate vehicles and weapons.

4 Merciless Creations 1942 Add-on and Texture Packs
PLANETDUNGEONSIEGE.COM/MERCILESSCREATIONS
Adds beefier sounds and more realistic graphics.

5 Homefront
PLANETBATTLEFIELD.COM/HOMEFRONT
Still in alpha, but shaping up to deliver what *Halo*'s multiplayer didn't.

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly

News and views from the Wild West

The Good

Star Wars Galaxies revamps Jedi system

We've harshed on this game for awhile now, but mostly out of "tough love." We want it to be as great as we know it could be. So kudos to Sony Online and LucasArts for finally acknowledging what everyone knew: The process of becoming a Jedi was totally lame. Now, becoming a Jedi will be quest-oriented and more accessible to all players. Also, Jedis won't suffer permanent death—good news to those who've invested months in becoming one. Now about that space combat....

The Bad

Legend Entertainment shut down

We couldn't let this seminal company's passing go unnoticed. Legend Entertainment, founded in 1989 by adventure game veteran Bob Bates, was shut down by corporate master Atari. Legend's most recent game, *Unreal 2*, was far from their best, so let's remember them for some of their better efforts: Steve Meretsky's Spellcasting games, *Wheel of Time, Eric the Unready, Superhero League of Hoboken*, and more.

The Ugly

Another Half-Life 2 delay

Another month, another *Half-Life 2* delay. Now the rumor mill has this game shipping in the fall of 2004, at best—which puts it a full year beyond the original promised release. Yes, there have been numerous unforseen setbacks, most notably the horrendous source code theft last fall, but still, we're beginning to get skeptical. Valve's track record at this point is second only to 3d Realms'. Or maybe you're still holding out for *Team Fortress 2*....

SEXYTIME

Boffo Game Brings the Showbiz

Lionhead takes us out to The Movies

Between *Black & White 2* and *The Movies*, Peter Molyneux's Lionhead Studios is busy as ever with ambitious games. In all honesty, when we last saw *The Movies* at E3, we were afraid the game might be overreaching. After all, it's part movie-studio simulator (keeping the actors happy and the sets are placed near each other) and part movie-maker. Can it do everything well? Lead Designer Adrian Moore flew in to set us straight and give an updated demo shortly before press time.

The biggest draw for us is the ability to put your own movie scenes together. "You can be as involved or as uninvolved [in the movie-making process,] as you want to be," says Moore. A huge kick, though, is being able to outfit your stars, set the stage, and shout "action!"

Taking place between 1900 and 2010, there are 40 set types that you can research, tweak, and customize to your liking. For those with a yen for putting together intricate plots, Moore promises between 2,000 and 3,000 different scenes that are broken down by genre. To add to the tinsel town feel, you pick how the story will play out by clicking on various onscreen storyboard sketches.

Is the scene not passionate enough? Move a slider and you can turn up the heat. Just be sure to make a coherent flick or the computerized reviewers will pan the picture. More interesting is that you'll be able to upload your flicks in various video formats to a Web site and let real world viewers rate your magnum opus. In fact, we wouldn't be surprised if this opens whole new doors in the world of Machinima. Winners (and losers, for that matter) of online polls will earn virtual cash that can be spent on downloading new content—scenes, sets, costumes, and so on. So, stay tuned as we begin storyboarding our *CGW*-sponsored snuff film...well, that and we'll bring you even more details on this game before it hits the big screens this fall. **Darren Gladstone**

Sims Shocker!

AY CARAMBA! This is a far cry from a *Far Cry* screenshot—and it's all the more shocking to know that it's a screen from *The Sims 2*, formerly family friendly fare that has become the best-selling PC game franchise.

Maxis admits that it continues to push the boundaries of behavior in *The Sims*, but we're wondering how such scenes could possibly limbo beneath the ESRB's Teen rating.

There's no way EA will allow an M-rated *Sims* game, so don't be surprised if these lascivious ladies have to put some clothes on before the game's release.

5 Year Plan

A game designer's past, present, and future

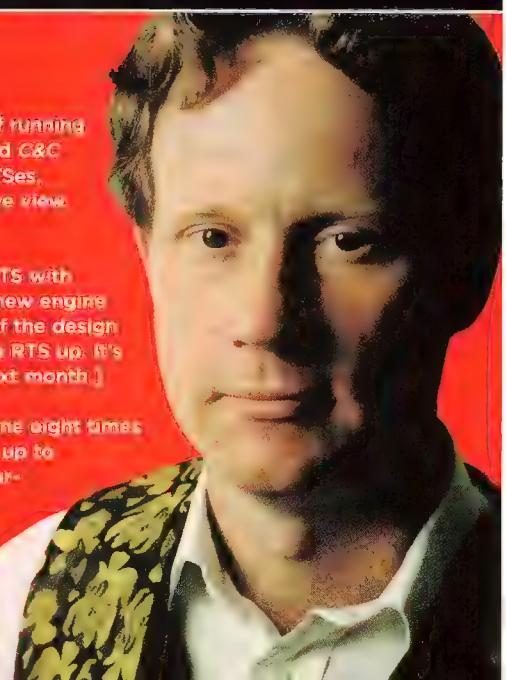
Mike Simpson

The Creative Assembly

What were you doing five years ago? In 1998 I'd just joined CA after a long stint of running internal development studios for Sony. We were planning to do a straightforward *C&C* clone, but while everyone else was moving to smaller scale, 2D, squad-based RTSes, we went the other way—more men. Lots more. And in full 3D with a general's eye view. *Shogun: Total War* was born.

What are you working on now? We're finishing off *Rome: Total War*. It's another RTS with massive armies in a mix of battlefield tactics and empire building, but it uses a new engine that's so powerful it's also being used to generate graphics for TV shows. One of the design aims is to break down the barriers that would stop some people from picking an RTS up. It's very easy to play and looks astounding. [See our exclusive hands-on preview next month.]

What do you hope to be doing five years from now? In five years we'll have an engine eight times more powerful than the current technology. Scenes close to photorealistic, with up to 100,000 men on screen at once. But what will we do with it? I expect we'll be further blurring the boundaries between genres—RTS, RPG, FPS, sim, and MMOG. The real world isn't a genre, and we'll be making real worlds. The possibilities are endless.



CONTRAPTIONS

Push Play

How hard are you willing to work to have fun?

The kiloWatt is basically a giant USB-powered gamepad.

Ready to hoist your prodigious posterior out of your gaming chair? Neither are we. But it's always amusing to see what new-fangled device entrepreneurs dream up to try to mix gaming with exercise—despite the blatant contradiction.

The kiloWatt, manufactured by Maryland-based Powergrid Fitness, is the first PC peripheral that lets you build arm strength while playing games. Earmarked at $695, you'll find it's a much pricier (but doubly effective) diversion than *Strip Poker*, previously the most popular bicep-enhancing exercise amongst computer owners.

Harnessing the principles of isometrics, the USB-enabled device translates force applied to a shoulder-height joystick into in-game motion. Strain gauge sensors located within the hand grips measure how much power is being applied and make the car or character you're controlling react accordingly. As a hands-on test reveals, the machine is quite accurate in this regard, performing best with offerings in the action, arcade, and racing genres.

While it will work with almost any game that can be played with a gamepad, it's better suited for titles that make momentum a core mechanic.

No less an authority than the American College of Sports Medicine confirms that the product stimulates muscle development. Console owners aren't being forsaken either; PlayStation 2 and Xbox versions are also planned for a spring launch.

Beware the once-feeble gamer, who'll henceforth be capable of crushing walnuts—and windpipes—with their mighty mitts. **Scott Steinberg**

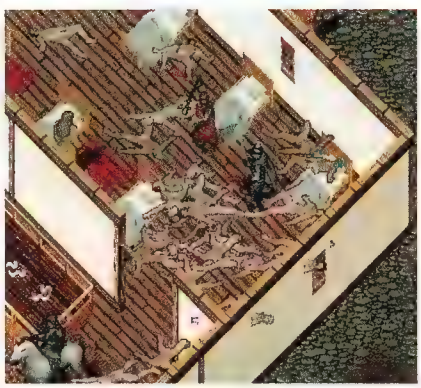
MMO NEWS

Retro UO

stfu b4 i pk u!

Are you a jaded, oldschool *Ultima Online* player? Do you pine for the good old days of classic *UO*, where risk was its own reward, and going toe-to-toe with bloodthirsty player killers was a large part of the game's appeal?

Someone has finally answered your prayers. A determined group of fans with the goal of creating a *UO* experience "for veterans who would have it no other way, by veterans who would have it no other way," launched a free *UO* server in November called "In Por Ylem" (named for one of the game's spells). With a dedicated volunteer staff and a set of rules that accurately mimics the late 1998-early 1999 era of *UO*, In Por Ylem has quickly managed to build a large fan base—well over 1,500 players, which is unheard of for an unofficial server. Check out www.wtfman.com/shard for details, and get ready to dust off that old *UO* CD! **Ryan Scott**



UO the way it was meant to be played.

The Nerd Herd

Street geeks speak

What percentage of your games do you actually finish?

Tracy Espeleta
REDWOOD CITY, CA
I'd say about 50 percent. Sometimes there are just too many games and too little time...or I blame my short attention span. What was I talking about?

Ryan Coyle
ORLANDO, FL
I finish only about 25 percent of the games I buy. I get distracted easily when a game isn't everything I want it to be and move on. Few games are worth finishing, I would say.

Markee Dragon
PORTLAND, OR
I finish 5 percent of the games I buy. That might be too high of a number. I never seem to have enough time to finish them. The ones I do finish always seem too short.

Michael Hawash
HOUSTON, TEXAS
I finish about 90 percent of the games I buy after I read a review. Of the hyped games that I rush out to buy before a review comes out, crappy interfaces, bugs, or annoying gameplay issues mean I finish only about 50 percent.

Aaron Ko
SAN FRANCISCO, CA
Wait, you mean these games are meant to be...finished? Well, maybe if you count that 10-second cinema at the end of *Deus Ex: Invisible War*.

INTERVIEW

Jon Van Caneghem Speaks

The true hero of Might and Magic reflects on the rise and fall of his dynasty

Though not as well known as some of his contemporaries, Jon Van Caneghem is one of PC gaming's great success stories—the founder of New World Computing and the sole creator of one of gaming's best franchises, Might and Magic. (Two of the games—*Might and Magic I* and *Heroes of Might and Magic II*—reside in *CGW*'s Hall of Fame.) 3DO's subsequent purchase of New World, as well as its near destruction of the franchise with mediocre products, is now part of industry legend—and also drove Van Caneghem into premature retirement. Now, for the first time, the creator of *Might and Magic* has agreed to speak publicly about his franchise: the good, the bad, and the superugly.

CGW: Tell us about your first game, as well as the beginning of New World Computing.
JVC: I started NWC in 1983 from my small apartment in Hollywood, CA. The first game I designed was *Might and Magic I* for the Apple II. Since I did most everything (programming, art, story, etc.) myself back then, it was the most satisfying creative experience I've ever had. It took me three years to finish, after which time I placed ads in the two hot computer gaming magazines at the time (CGW and A+). The 800 number for orders and customer support rang in my living room!

CGW: How big was New World Computing at its peak? When did you sell it to 3DO—and why?
JVC: At its peak, NWC had over 100 people. New World was sold to 3DO in 1996 for several reasons. Budgets for new games were skyrocketing. The industry was consolidating, and it was getting harder to get shelf space; lots of new companies were entering the market with huge budgets and a new financial model. I decided to sell and stay [so] that I could focus on making games and not have to worry about everything else that went into running a software publisher.

CGW: What were the worst decisions 3DO made concerning New World or your franchises?
JVC: Well, there were a few. I believed that MM RPGs and *Heroes* games could have gone on for a very long time if we had created something new and innovative every 2 to 3 years. But the need for "sales growth," mandated by 3DO, required us to make a new *MM* RPG and a new Heroes product every year—some in 10 months or less!

Second, one of the main reasons I was excited to go with 3DO was the ability to create *Might and Magic Online*. 3DO had the entire infrastructure from their game *Meridian 59*. With all the ideas I had (most of which have still not appeared in current games), we could have created something really awesome. The future for me in 1996 was definitely online games. Alas, the decision was that for the same budget as *MMO*, 3DO could make three PS2 games.

Third, at some point, the decision process at 3DO regarding which products to produce and develop was completely

controlled by the head of sales!?! Here is how it went: The development teams and execs at 3DO made lists of products they would like to make or could make, the sales department would estimate how many of each of these hypothetical games they could sell, and this would determine the budget of the title—or if it was even worth developing. Madness!

CGW: How involved were you with Heroes of *Might and Magic IV* or *Might and Magic IX*? How did you feel about the release of these games?
JVC: I worked on the initial design for *Heroes IV*, then when things started to go awry (too many cooks in the kitchen), I had to help finish the game and get it into a shippable state. To the credit of the team involved, I think we were able to create a fun game, even though it had many flaws that I was very unhappy with. I had little to no involvement with *MMIX*; if it had been my decision, it would have never shipped.

CGW: You must have made some valiant appeals on behalf of New World with some of 3DO's decisions—did they fall on deaf ears? Or were the execs just clueless?
JVC: Yes, you would think that the advice from probably the only game designer with two Hall of Fame series, in two different genres spanning two decades, might know something about development! Bah! Deaf ears, clueless—call it what you want. I gave up.

CGW: Ubisoft owns the rights to your old franchises now. Will you be involved with *Heroes V* at all?
JVC: Ubisoft has contacted me regarding *Heroes V*. They are building the game with one of their Russian development groups, and we are currently discussing if it would make sense for me to participate on the project.

CGW: Do you regret having sold New World to them? What lessons did you learn from the experience?
JVC: I will never regret selling NWC, since I know many other companies similar to NWC went out of business. I do feel bad about watching the franchises I created wither away. But I did learn quite a few lessons along the way. Mainly that if you're not happy with what you're doing, you need to move on, regardless of the difficulty. Failure is temporary, regret can last forever! Overall, I am very proud of all the games I made over the years and very happy knowing all the fun I have created for so many people! **Jeff Green**

Jon Van Caneghem's Gameography

In addition to the games he designed and created (below), Van Caneghem was involved with dozens of games published by New World Computing, including *Anvil of Dawn*, *Hammer of the Gods*, *Spaceward Ho!*, *Iron Cross*, *Wetlands*, and the *Empire* series (*Empire*, *Empire Deluxe*, and *Empire II*).

MIGHT AND MAGIC I-VI

Part of the original holy trinity of awesome PC RPG franchises (along with the *Ultima* and *Wizardry* series), the first six *Might and Magic* games were huge, brilliantly entertaining smorgasbords of fun—deep, challenging, and utterly addictive. **BEST GAME:** *Might and Magic IV: Clouds of Xeen*, 1992.

HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC I-III

Originally an offshoot of the RPGs, these turn-based strategy games quickly eclipsed the RPGs in popularity and brought mainstream success to the *Might and Magic* name. Years later, this is still the series to which all fantasy strategy games are compared. **BEST GAME:** *Heroes of Might and Magic II*, 1996.

KINGS BOUNTY

The precursor to the *Heroes* strategy games, made by Van Caneghem in 1990. Not as polished as the *Heroes* games, but still a marvel of game design.

SWEET!

Max Payne 2 Mod Contest

Win a crunked Falcon Northwest PC and other loot

So you're low on dough but got the mad mod skillz, huh? Rockstar and *CGW* have you covered. We're looking to give away a killer custom PC worth $6,000, plus loads of loot in *The Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne* Mod Contest. There's no purchase necessary, but you're going to have to earn it nonetheless.

There are three categories: Best Original Mod, Best New Dead-Man-Walking Level, and Best Real-Time Noninteractive Movie (Trailer). Each category has different prizes, but the biggie is the custom *Max Payne 2* Falcon Northwest PC shown here. Other prizes include an ATI Radeon 9800 XT graphics card, Logitech cordless keyboard and mouse, *Max Payne 2* jacket, and more.

The deadline for entries is May 15, 2004, so you better get crackin'. See page 125 for full contest rules and entry information. Good luck, mighty men of modding!

Console Corner

Games worth grabbing from your little brother

Damn those console gamers. They often get good titles that for some reason aren't available on PC. Ah well, here's this month's pick:

PLAYSTATION 2

Champions of Norrath

Remember the good old days when you'd waste countless hours in front of your PC playing *EverQuest*? Well, thank you Evercrack for reaching out your sinister tendrils to a brand-new, unsuspecting audience. What amounts to an RPG-laced cross between *Diablo* and *Gauntlet* has the whole office racing out to buy PS2s, and it's sure to sucker in a whole new wave of action gamers as well. The big deal for PlayStation 2 owners is that this game not only looks sharp, but it also has infinite replayability, online multiplayer, and voice chat. That's right, the dungeons you spelunk are randomly generated and the monsters ramp up as you level up. Johnny, Jeff, Ryan, and I are sure to team up and tackle demons over a broadband connection.

ALSO CHECK OUT: EA Sports Fight Night 2004 (Xbox, PS2); MTX: Mototrax (GC, PS2, Xbox) **Darren Gladstone**

5, 10, 15 Years Ago in *CGW*

What we said when you were nursing

5 Years Ago, April 1999

Let's just call this The Bad Idea Issue. This month sported the most-reviled cover in *CGW* history. Frankly, we should have known better—of course our readers would be disturbed when confronted by real-life breasts instead of the sharply polygonal ones for which they bought games. Fair enough. Still more dubious decisions accumulated within the mag: Columnist Terry Coleman opined that adventure games could be saved by licensing *The Avengers* and *Dr. Who*, while Scorpia wrote the most negative four-star review in history for the classic *Baldur's Gate*. Man alive, did we ever earn the avalanche of hate mail that followed.

10 Years Ago, April 1994

Now, here was a cover our pocket-protected readership could get behind—head shots of the whole friggin' cast of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Yeah, baby! And what did we offer them inside? A huge feature on the then-brand-new and (seriously) exciting CD-ROM media that was going to change games forever. We might have been a little too excited by the full-motion video, but the graphics we spotlighted from *The 7th Guest* and *Myst* were worthy of the hullabaloo.

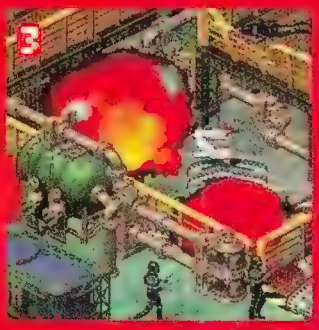
15 Years Ago, April 1989

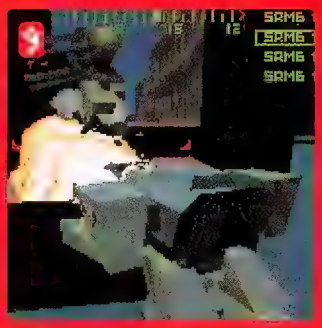
Let's conclude this month's stroll down memory lane with one more incredible cover. Our Computer Cavalcade of Sports blowout featured three clip-art sportsmen on a battleship-grey background. Wow! Could any other design have so totally captured the excitement and thrill of sports competition? Could any other artistic treatment have so cunningly and effectively screamed "buy this magazine"? Well, maybe some ASCII art of a basketful of puppies, but other than that, no!

FUN TIME

Name That Game

How many of these classics can you identify?





ANSWERS: 1) BALDUR'S GATE II, 2) PRO PINBALL: BIG RACE USA, 3) CRUSADER: NO REMORSE, 4) DUNE II, 5) FLIGHT SIMULATOR FOR APPLE II, 6) JAGGED ALLIANCE 2, 7) UNDER A KILLING MOON, 8) KING'S QUEST, 9) MECHWARRIOR 2, 10) PANZER GENERAL, 11) SIM THEME PARK, 12) ULTIMA IV

Hall of Fame

A fond look back at a classic game of yore

X-COM

YEAR RELEASED: 1994 **PUBLISHER:** MicroProse

X-COM's brilliant mix of aerial combat, tactical strategy, and resource management all set to a haunting soundtrack kept gamers up till the wee hours trying to rid the world of aliens. Its elements weren't brand new, but they'd never before been so seamlessly integrated into a tactical strategy game. Soldiers' statistics improved with time, and alien opponents were creepy, challenging, and on the higher levels, downright merciless. It's a timeless classic that many gamers still would like to see updated and/or redone.

Get a Life

Find something else to amuse yourself with

MOVIE AND DVD

Kill Bill

There are several people I wouldn't want to sit next to on a cross-country bus ride. One of them is Quentin Tarantino. Don't get me wrong. The first two hours would rock: picking his brain and unearthing a torrent of the tiniest minutiae across decades of film. But when it comes time to sleep, I'm not sure Quent prattling on about the re-contextualization of exploitationism is something I want to hear. Yet that's what makes him such an inspired director. *Kill Bill* is the product of every last one of his synapses snapping into place: the intentionally bad '70s movie edits, the spewing blood and carnage, the stark themes that draw from the vast pool of B movies.

Unfortunately for all of us desperately waiting for part two and the DVD, we'll just have to wait a little longer. Both release dates have been pushed back—the DVD of *Volume 1* drops in April at the same time *Volume 2* comes out in theaters. Eventually, there will be a more complete Special Edition that compiles both volumes, but if you're in need of a quick memory kick to the head, this DVD has you covered. **Johnny Liu**

MUSIC

Z-Trip

WWW.DJZTRIP.COM

Z-Trip has been spinning records for more than 15 years, offering up amazing turntable skills that cover a wide spectrum of musical genres. His hilariously cheesy nightclub "spin" on Mystikal's "Shake Your Ass" is characteristic of the humor he brings to his music. The mixes he creates rise to a level where they can be considered original works in themselves.

CARTOON

Aqua Teen Hunger Force

These guys aren't your average extra value meal. There's Frylock, the sensible one, fried and floating. Meatwad is a

dense scraplet of protein. And then there's the milkshake that's not quite better than yours...Master Shake, totally clueless yet fully self-assured. The show might not make sense at first, but the pure irreverence is addictive. *Fast Food Nation* has nothing on this team.

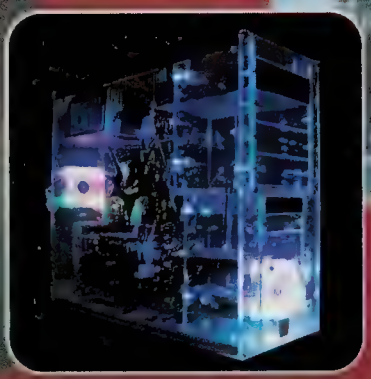
ANIME

Rurouni Kenshin Boxset 2

The life of a warrior is bathed with blood and honor. Kenshin, a reformed assassin, has turned away from his brutal past life, wielding a blade sharpened on the inside edge so that he may never kill again. The second box set moves into a darker story arc in which Kenshin must face killers who plot to overthrow the government.

THE ULTIMATE GAME MACHINE

VICIOUS PC



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CGW Top 20

Wasted time well spent

Rank	Game	Rating
1	Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (LucasArts)	★★★★★
2	Call of Duty (Activision)	★★★★★
3	Max Payne 2 (Rockstar)	★★★★★
4	Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of WWII (EA Games)	★★★★★
5	Prince of Persia (Ubisoft)	★★★★★
6	The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (EA Games)	★★★★★
7	Age of Mythology: The Titans (Microsoft)	★★★★★
8	The Simpsons: Hit & Run (Vivendi)	★★★★★
9	C&C Generals: Zero Hour (EA Games)	★★★★★
10	Final Fantasy XI (Square Enix)	★★★★★

Rank	Game	Rating
11	Tron 2.0 (Disney)	★★★★★
12	Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 (Activision)	★★★★★
13	Star Wars Galaxies (Sony Online/LucasArts)	★★★★★
14	Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna (Microsoft)	★★★★★
15	Madden NFL 2004 (EA Sports)	★★★★★
16	Beyond Good & Evil (Ubisoft)	★★★★★
17	Freedom Fighters (EA Games)	★★★★★
18	SimCity 4: Rush Hour (EA Games)	★★★★★
19	XIII (Ubisoft)	★★★★★
20	Midnight Club II (Rockstar)	★★★★★

Survey results of games from the last six months. To vote, go to www.computergaming.com.

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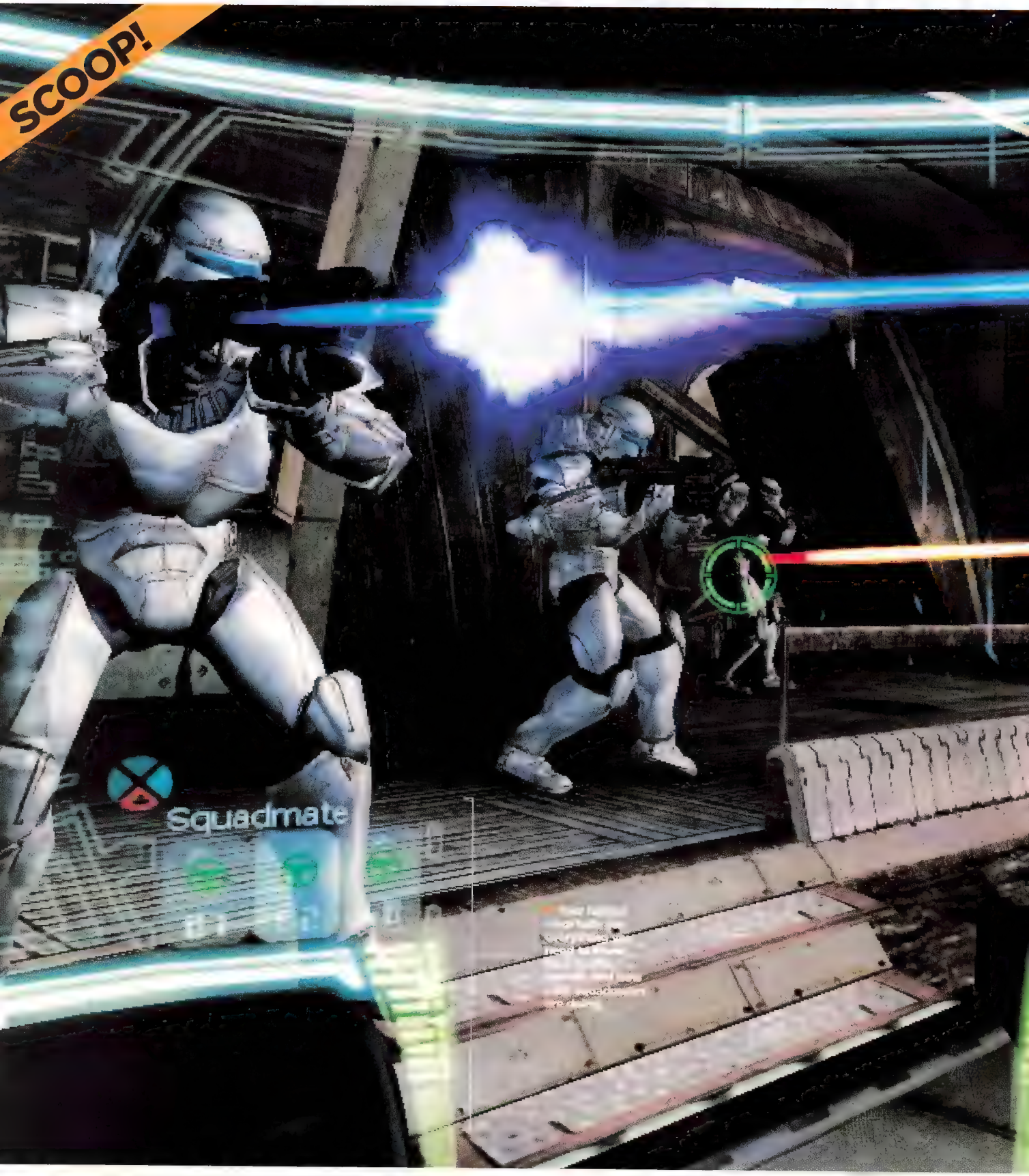
PC MAGAZINE

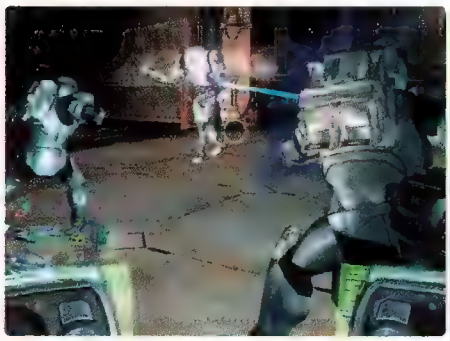
THE INDEPENDENT GUIDE TO TECHNOLOGY


SCOOP!
Squadmate

PUBLISHER: **LucasArts** DEVELOPER: **LucasArts** GENRE: **First-Person Trooper** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2004**

Star Wars: Republic Commando

Having a million twin brothers must be nice



"Has anyone seen Klank?"

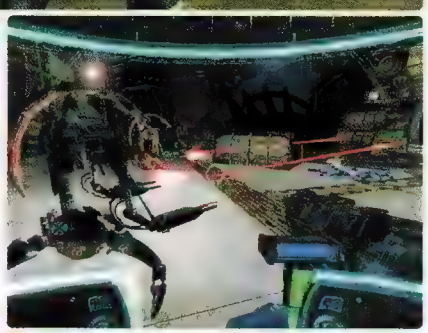
It's the beginning of duck season in a galaxy far, far away.

It's not all about the square-jawed dashing hero, you know. Everyone has a purpose...even those lurking in the background only to be shot within their 14 seconds of screen time. Such is the case with stormtroopers, the hired help of the *Star Wars* universe. They're rarely afforded the opportunity to shine in the spotlight, but LucasArts finally aims to do them justice in *Republic Commando*. Yes, the omnipresent but disposable stormtrooper finally has his day in the sun.

An icon of popular culture, the stormtrooper signifies many things. In *Star Wars'* early days, when Luke Skywalker and Han Solo were busy making life hard for the Empire, the stormtrooper was little more than a two-dimensional prop, a means to signify an upcoming battle or a period of resistance for our heroes. These soldiers were rarely a true threat, as their shots almost always missed. In short, stormtroopers were the Keystone Kops of space.

But then came *Episode II*. The much-maligned comedic stormtroopers of the Empire were suddenly much more serious as soldiers of the Republic. By the time Yoda and Mace Windu dropshipped a few thousand stormtroopers on Count Dooku's resistance, you could see their potential as a true menace. Taking place between *Episode II* and *Episode III*, *Republic Commando* will offer, possibly for the first time, a real look into the life of a stormtrooper.

As you might have noticed, stormtroopers are not solo run-n-gun types. Trained by the Republic to be loyal, obedient soldiers, it isn't within their nature to move independently, unless they're the higher-ranked Republic commandos. Trained to survive the missions that would make a low-level grunt weep into his MRE, a Republic commando must be able to think on his feet, adapt to high-pressure situations, and, most important, survive. As in *Rainbow Six 3*, you, as the leader of a four-man squad of commandos, must follow your mission orders and lead your crew to take care of business—you're calling the shots and issuing basic commands to your teammates. They'll hack doors, set up sniping spots, and man the turrets.



Remember those rolling droidica bots from *Episode I*? You'll wish you didn't.

The hired thug of the *Star Wars* movies, the disposable stormtrooper finally has his day in the sun.

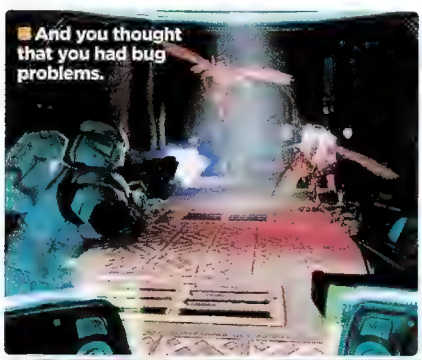
See the stars

Republic Commando's terrain is spread out over three large and diverse environments.

The first area is the setting for a massive conflict called the Battle of Geonosis. Your squad of commandos will be sent into the battle and on covert missions that skirt the main encounter. It will be up to the commandos to complete objectives and trigger events that ultimately turn the tide of battle in the Republic's favor.

The second stage—an homage to the old-school classic *Star Wars* days—takes place on the Republic Capital Ship. Basically a prototype for the Death Star, the Capital Ship, set deep in the Outer Rim, has been taken over by non-Republic forces. Your commandos are sent out on reconnaissance and, ideally, will assume control of the ship. If you can imagine trying to clear the way like you did in the first section of *Halo* but with only a squad to watch your back, you're halfway there.

The third and final area brings you to the Wookiee planet of Kashyyyk, last seen in *Knights of the Old Republic*. This is where *Republic Commando* starts to feel similar to the jungle missions found in other first-person shooters. Think of it as *Commando*'s Vietnam. Here, the Wookiees request the Republic's assistance as separatist forces begin to establish a stranglehold on Kashyyyk. Naturally, your team plays a large part in suppressing this unfortunate incident.



And you thought that you had bug problems.

Black ops

Mission objectives range from assassination attempts—like knocking off a high-ranking Geonosian official—to rescue missions that have you freeing several Wookiee POWs. Occasionally, you'll have to hold back a surging separatist party while you wait for Republic reinforcements.

If LucasArts' goal is to put you in the rarely worn shoes of a stormtrooper, then it's doing a tight job. Even in its current state, *Commando* looks great. The primary reason? Fantastic light-sourcing effects, which come not from the lights on the stormtroopers' rifles but from the troopers themselves. Shadows bend and stretch, and the darkness and light results in a rich overall intensity. Additionally, the troopers are designed particularly well, delivering the feeling that you're teamed with stealthy and powerful partners.

Your arsenal relies on the versatility of a single adaptable weapon: the DC-17 assault rifle. While the default setting is for the typical blaster fire—the rate of which can be increased at the cost of lower accuracy—it can be upgraded with sniper attachments and other useful enhancements, like an ion muffler for stealth kills. Conveniently, the ammo count is displayed on the weapon itself, and should you require a backup, you can carry a second weapon. Additional items, such as Geonosian sonic blasters and thermal detonators, will also be introduced in *Commando*.

Perhaps the game's most useful feature is the stormtrooper's visor, which is fully utilized as a HUD. Everything you need to know about your current status is displayed right there, from your shield energy to your health level. The interface's blend of utility and minimalism feels just right. Hell, so far it looks like *Republic Commando* is doing a good job of selling the illusion that you're really wearing that suit of armor. Also, being able to heal your teammates (Yo, *Rainbow Six*, you listening?) or have them heal you is a big plus.

How the game fares once it's completed will depend on how compelling the single-player action is and the number of multiplayer modes available, which, at this state, has not been finalized. *Commando* will support four teams of four (for a maximum of 16 players, math freaks) online and offer differing decals and textures so you can identify better with each player. *Republic Commando* ships this fall. **James Mielke**

Why is this Republic commando holding his side, you ask? Bad burrito.

Toon Wars

Forget that lame, old animated Ewok show—the Cartoon Network's *Clone Wars* ain't that. This series of slickly animated shorts is directed by Genndy Tartakovsky, creator of *Samurai Jack* and *Dexter's Laboratory*. You can witness a range of troopers in the series, including the elite ARC trooper—a likely candidate for the *Republic Commando* corps. Look for season two on Cartoon Network.

the word GEORGE CLONE-Y

PUBLISHER: **Codemasters** DEVELOPER: **Best Way** GENRE: **Action/RTS** RELEASE DATE: **June 2004**

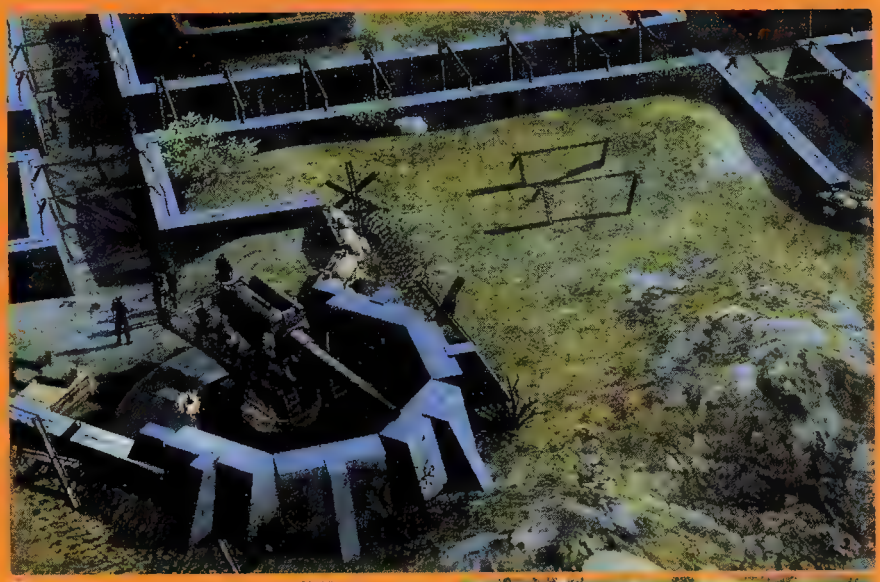
Soldiers: Heroes of World War II

A good commando game from Russia...with love

Eidos was winning the WWII action/strategy war until Codemasters' *Commandos III: Destination Berlin* came along. Now, Codemasters is hoping to draft new fans by importing *Soldiers: Heroes of World War II*, a Russian take on the *Commandos* series and *Hidden and Dangerous 2*—with a little *Cannon Fodder* thrown in for good measure.

This tactical RTS pits the Allies against the Axis yet again. You choose to play as Soviet, American, British, or German forces, and it's your squad of five or six soldiers against all the opposing forces on the map. We know, it hardly seems fair.

You have tactical control of your team, so it's your job to tell them where to go, what vehicles to man, and so on. But, unlike the *Commandos* series, *Soldiers* focuses much more on action. The soldiers you control can hop into any vehicle available in the game—and there will be 105 different vehicles to choose from. That includes wheeled, tracked, and winged crafts, all of which are realistically modeled on their real-life counterparts. And while Codemasters promises that the enemy A.I. will be particularly vicious (read: capable of engaging in formation attacks, retreating if overpowered, looking for cover, and ambushing you), apparently, so will your own troops.



Need to do some urban renewal? You can.

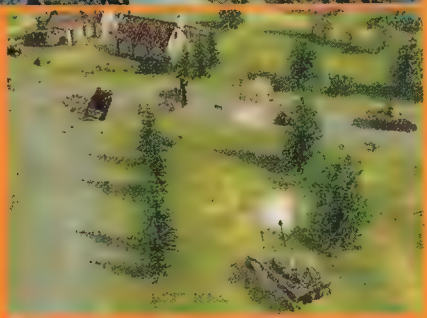
While you can give orders to your entire squad, you can also take direct control of a single unit and open fire.

A good soldier never dies...

What really appeals to us is that while you can give orders to your entire squad, you can also take direct control of a single unit and open fire. Load up all your men into a tank and roll on, shooting everything in your path. Have one guy run over to an artillery encampment and do a little urban renewal. Or, in some missions, guide a single trooper behind enemy lines where he kills when necessary.

There are a lot of incentives to keep your characters alive throughout the varied 30-mission campaign. Assignments will have you kidnapping officers, blowing up train tracks, destroying convoys, planning assassinations, and rescuing POWs. And any item (weapons, vehicles, and so on) you pick up in the field carries over from one mission to the next. It never hurts to have an extra gun at your side.

And speaking of extra guns...in the six-person multiplayer mode, each player can control one soldier and roll into battle cooperatively against the PC. It seems cool, but we wish we could orchestrate some serious PVP battles with two squads of six fighting each other. At least, that's what we suggested.



One tank or 20—it doesn't matter, Fritz, you're going down.

The other big star of this game is its incredible attention to detail. You can get a hint from the screens, but to see all the different animations in action is a thing of beauty. Besides, with a fully (and realistically) destructible environment, just about anything is tactically possible. We shot a hole clean through a house and then rammed a tank through the rubble. You can uproot trees and have them fall on enemies. The sky, quite literally, is the limit. What can't you do? Well, you can't go around blowing up armored vehicles with a handgun, but you can take out the tires, leaving it a sitting duck. Definitely keep your eyes peeled for this one come summertime. **Darren Gladstone**

The Word: DOSVIDANYA

PUBLISHER: **Encore** DEVELOPER: **Ascaron Entertainment** GENRE: **Action-RPG** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2004**

Sacred

We swear it isn't another *Diablo* clone...kinda

Those waiting for another Blizzard-created *Diablo* title probably shouldn't hold their breath. It took, what, three years for the company to come out with the 1.10 patch? But those who pay close attention know we already called *Sacred* a hot import that could do well (Outta Sight, *CGW* #230, September 2003, page 72).

The way we see it, given enough time (and aborted attempts at imitation), someone was eventually going to copy *Diablo*'s winning formula and get it right. *Sacred*'s game world is not only huge, but also gorgeous and detailed, with lots of replayability—and it even throws in some new ideas that have us itching to play.

First, let's dig into the numbers and some of the cool conventions that *Sacred* has to offer. Six character classes mean there's a good deal of variety when it comes to the way you'll be busting heads. The gladiator and battlemage are pretty straightforward if you've ever slashed a sword or slung a spell. The dark elf is a martial-arts assassin who can dabble in (duh) the dark arts. Goody-goody wood elves are rangers who use nature magic. But here's where it gets interesting: The seraphim is an angelic warrior with some ungodly fighting skills, while the vampire roams the land as a warrior by day and then gets a whole new set of powers at night, including summoning bats and wolves, and, of course, that penchant for sucking people's blood.

Zoom in close to check out the action—and this seraphim's heavenly body.

Given enough time (and aborted attempts at imitation), someone was eventually going to copy *Diablo*'s winning formula and get it right.

Lots to do

We like that you can suit up your crew with the 3,000 different items waiting to be found and imbued with special abilities, but what's really interesting is the way you develop combat skills and then combine them. As in the *Diablo* games, you level up and earn various spells, attacks, and so on. But in *Sacred*, when you grab a sack of gold and head over to the town wizard, you can mix together your own customized combination moves from all the abilities you've already acquired.

How do these attacks—and the game, for that matter—look? The screenshots do the talking here, friend. We dig the smooth animation and attention to detail, with random weather patterns, several levels of zoom that let you get up close to the action, day/night cycles that affect characters, and even random wildlife roaming the great plains. We just wish we could interact with (in a word: hunt) the creatures.

As you travel alone, with four friends in multiplayer co-op, or in a 16-player deathmatch mode, you'll have plenty of ground to cover. While we don't have actual mileage counts for you, product specialist Jeff Pugh says he's been playing for more than 25 hours and has gotten through about a third of the game. That might have something to do with the fact that from the very beginning, about 75 percent of the game world is open to explore as you see fit—and that's without getting into the 30 main quest missions and countless random quests that pop up all the time. Thankfully, your characters can eventually learn to ride a horse in order to get across the world a little more quickly. You, on the other hand, should be able to saddle up and play it for yourself shortly after you read this. **Darren Gladstone**

Bustling towns will keep you occupied with plenty of random quests.

Don't worry, there will be plenty of spells to be slung.

The word: **HELL-RAISER**

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XS games

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Battles take place in real-time, unlike in most MMORPGs.

What is scarier: being surrounded by these guys or their choice of underwear?

Fulfill quests and get your just rewards.

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft Game Studios** DEVELOPER: **Microsoft Game Studios** GENRE: **MMORPG** RELEASE DATE: **2004**

Mythica

Hammer of the gods

Just before this issue went to press, Mythic Entertainment (the guys behind *Dark Age of Camelot*) demanded that Microsoft change the name of *Mythica*. We don't have the new title as we go to press, but that doesn't change how this MMORPG is shaping up. That said, on with the preview.

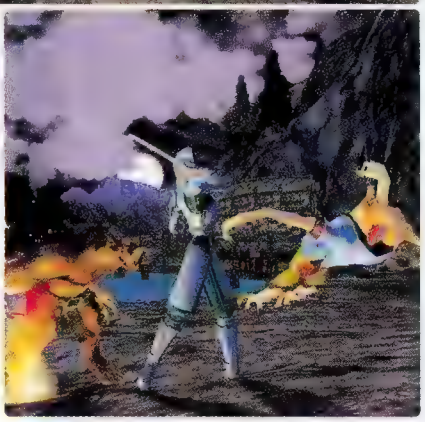
Real life is cruelly efficient at making you feel inconsequential. Good games make you feel like a conquering hero, but *Mythica* is aiming even higher—it wants to make you feel like a god. And as a massively multiplayer online RPG, *Mythica* is shooting to make a whole pantheon of deities.

Set in the realm of classic Norse mythology, *Mythica* has you choose a class (the usual—fighter, demonologist, etc.), a patron god (Odin, Loki, etc.), and a race (dwarf, human, etc.) and then drops you into the sprawling game world. So far, very routine. So what is going to set this game apart from every other online level treadmill?

For one thing, *Mythica* will feature action-oriented gameplay. This doesn't mean there are big fancy-pants animations for turn-based combat (though all the animations are drawn on an appropriately godlike scale, with bodies flying during battles and explosions ripping through armies). No, this means combat takes place in real time. It's more *Diablo* than *EverQuest*—you'll have to dodge the fireballs of your enemies, precisely time that killing blow, and protect your mage effectively so that the fire giants, who are your principal foes in the game, don't get the chance to disrupt that crucial spell.

In spite of this more hack-n-slash style of play, *Mythica* will grant level-gaining experience when players achieve objectives, as opposed to every time they smite something. This not only underscores the team concept vital to these online games, but it also reinforces the mission-based style underlying the quests. For example, your team of aspiring deities will be tasked with helping a certain human commander hold off a fire giant onslaught. You'll be dropped into this pocket universe and randomly placed. You can make a beeline to protect the commander and his forces or take the fight directly to the enemy. You can slug it out toe-to-toe with the monsters or try to capture some fireball-slinging catapults and use them to take out the bulk of your adversaries. Microsoft is really trying to open up the possibilities in these battles to an almost strategy-game level, since it knows players are going to play these missions a number of times.

Combat takes place in real time—it's more *Diablo* than *EverQuest*.



The gods must be crazy

Not only will you be fighting alongside hordes of human NPCs, you'll also be collecting these guys as followers; after all, what would a god be without worshippers? Followers won't literally follow you around like some private army—they become more of a tool for you, toiling in the background crafting or performing quests. You'll be able to create heroes out of some followers; these are specialized supplicants who can do more than the average Sven, even earning experience for you. Guilds will be able to pool followers to accomplish even bigger tasks, and you'll be able to swap followers with other players. The best thing: All this takes place in real time, even when you're offline. You can give your orders, log off, and then come back in a couple days: Your followers will have finished one job and be ready for more.

Everything about this game is big—from the casting rites that can be performed only by teams to the size of the battles and enemies, to the initial 100-level cap to the monolithic game world spread across seven planes of existence, to the ability to interact with gods like Thor. And the potential to grow even bigger is enormous. *Mythica* is being built with an open end capable of accommodating not only traditional expansion packs but also, quite possibly, entirely new pantheons (Greek, Egyptian, and so on). **Robert Coffey**

The Word: **GOD DAMN**

Far Cry

With first-person shooters like *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3* hogging all the limelight, few others can catch a break. *Far Cry*, though, looks like it can stand on its own, with breathtaking views and—as you may have guessed from this screenshot—a whole lot of action. Besides the variety of vehicles to fight and fly, check out the draw distance. With a rocket launcher, Magnum P.I. over there is leveling a guard tower clear across the island. *Far Cry* should be on shelves as you read this, and we can't wait to get our hands on it.

PIPELINE

Ship dates and slip dates for games in the stream

Game	Developer	Expected
8th Wonder of the World	GMX Media	Q1 2004
Advent Rising	Majesco Games	September 2004
Atlantis Evolution	The Adventure Company	April 2004
The Bard's Tale	InXile Entertainment	2004
Battlefield Vietnam	EA Games	March 2004
Black & White II	EA Games	June 2004
BloodRayne 2	Majesco Games	October 2004
Breed	CDV Software	March 2004
Bulletproof Monk	Empire Interactive	Q1 2004
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	Bethesda Softworks	August 2004
City of Heroes	NCsoft	April 2004
Codename: Panzers	CDV Software	Q1 2004
Counter-Strike: Condition Zero	Sierra	March 2004
CSI: Crime Scene Investigation — Dark Motives	Ubisoft	Q1 2004
Dead Man's Hand	Atari	March 2004
Desert Rats vs. Afrika Korps	Encore Software	March 2004
Doom 3	Activision	April 2004
Dragon Empires	Codemasters	Q2 2004
DRIV3R	Atari	June 2004
Dungeon Siege II	Microsoft	2004
Egyptian Prophecy	The Adventure Company	April 2004
EverQuest II	SOE	June 2004
Evil Genius	Vivendi Universal	Q3 2004
Far Cry	Ubisoft	March 2004
Flat-Out	Empire Interactive	Q3 2004
Forever Worlds	The Adventure Company	March 2004
Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich	TBA	2004
Full Spectrum Warrior	THQ	2004
Ground Control 2: Operation Exodus	NDA Productions	Q2 2004
Guild Wars	NCsoft	2004
Half-Life 2	Vivendi Universal	Q2 2004
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	EA Games	Q1 2004
Hitman: Contracts	Eidos Interactive	April 2004
The I of the Dragon	Strategy First	March 2004
I of the Enemy	Enemy Technology	Q2 2004
IL-2 Sturmovik: Forgotten Battles expansion	Ubisoft	Q1 2004
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising	NovaLogic	March 2004
kill.switch	Hip Interactive	March 2004

New Update

PUBLISHER: **Strategy First** DEVELOPER: **Primal Software** GENRE: **Action-RPG** RELEASE DATE: **March 2004**

The I of the Dragon

Burning down the house

We can prove empirically that dragons rock, and Strategy First has thankfully taken this into account in upcoming action-RPG *The I of the Dragon*. Goofy name aside, we dig the idea of being in the shoes—er, claws—of any of three dragons, each with its own set of abilities. Your young dragonling learns new skills and magic spells as it matures, eventually growing powerful enough to take on the evil forces that threaten the land of Nimoan.

You'll burn through 20 different missions that span a dozen unique areas. Nimoan's landscape can be terramorphed to your will; you've can raise or level mountains, cause volcanoes to erupt, and trigger earthquakes and other natural disasters. Hopefully, you'll foster a few prosperous towns and some happy villagers in your wake—but it's not like anyone will argue with you if you decide to torch the place. **Ryan Scott**

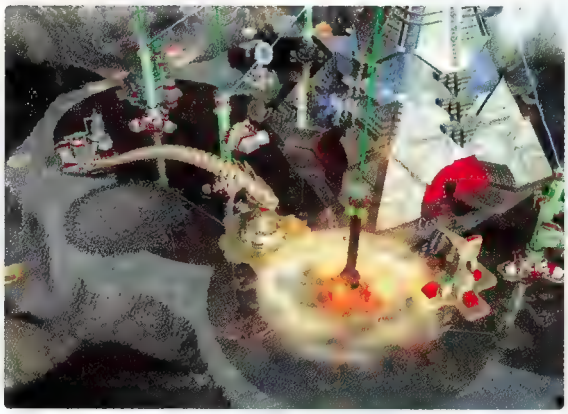
The Word: **TOASTY**

PUBLISHER: **Codemasters** DEVELOPER: **1C** GENRE: **Real-time Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **May 2004**

Perimeter

The biggest land grab this side of the Milky Way

The open country is beautiful, but a field of concrete is profit in the sci-fi real-time-strategy game *Perimeter*. In a distant-future realm of alternate worlds, mountains are bulldozed to fill in valleys, creating flat worlds to colonize. Traditional units of exchange such as wood and food aren't even used. The system of economy in *Perimeter* works on how much territory you've leveled or terraformed.



Even the infantry and workers you command are far beyond traditional. Units are nanotechnology-machine based; if you need more powerful weapons, you simply "transmogrify" several basic soldier units together. You not only spar against two alternate factions (for a total of three), but also face "natural" disasters, the most bizarre of which is a giant earthen face sliding around, leaving a path of bumpy destruction. Things like this occasionally make it feel like Salvador Dali conceived the game, but in the design sense, *Perimeter* bears connection to *Go*, an Asian territorial-strategy board game. Look for this decidedly different RTS in May 2004. **Johnny Liu**

The Word: **PAVED**

PUBLISHER: **Playlogic Intl.** DEVELOPER: **Widescreen Games** GENRE: **Action** RELEASE DATE: **March 2004**

Airborne Troops

Behind enemy lines

Screw stealth. Once in a while, we need a straightforward run-n-gun game—and who better to gun than a few digitized fascists? *Airborne Troops* drops you into occupied France during World War II, and it's your job to help dismantle the German Wehrmacht and get out in one piece.

You have the option to go cloak-and-dagger (the animation of sneaking up behind a bad guy and jabbing him with a knife is particularly satisfying), but the real fun comes from accomplishing objectives and surviving. One possible gripe: *Airborne Troops* may be a bit console-ish for some tastes. You can interact only with certain parts of the game world. (Not sure what those parts are? Look for the floating, blinking lights and arrows.) Well, that and the controls seem a bit unusual—you right-click to arm your weapon before you can shoot—but making Fritz eat some lead for breakfast is so satisfying that we're willing to be forgiving (at least until we see the final code). **Darren Gladstone**

The Word **SAVING PRIVATES**

PUBLISHER: **GMX Media** DEVELOPER: **Shockwave Prod.** GENRE **Flight Sim** RELEASE DATE: **March 2004**

FirePower for Combat Flight Simulator 3

Fly away home

All right, flyboys, here's yet another chance to relive World War II battles in Microsoft's *Combat Flight Simulator 3*. In *FirePower*, you're thrown into the cockpit of 12 new aircraft in more than 50 missions.

The hype of being able to man all positions in a B-17 Flying Fortress certainly got our attention, as did attacking it as a German ace, but there's also the promise of a few graphic tweaks to the *CFS3* engine.

Check out the screenshot for yourself if you don't believe us. The PR folks trumpet that more than 30 real war-bird pilots helped design the planes, making for realistic handling and effects. Witness the press-release hyperbole: "You will experience revolutionary, explosive special effects like never before. Witness towering explosive blasts, aircraft being torn in half, and smoke drifting thousands of feet above the battlefields." True? We'll see for ourselves soon enough—the final add-on should hit stores by the time you read this. **Darren Gladstone**

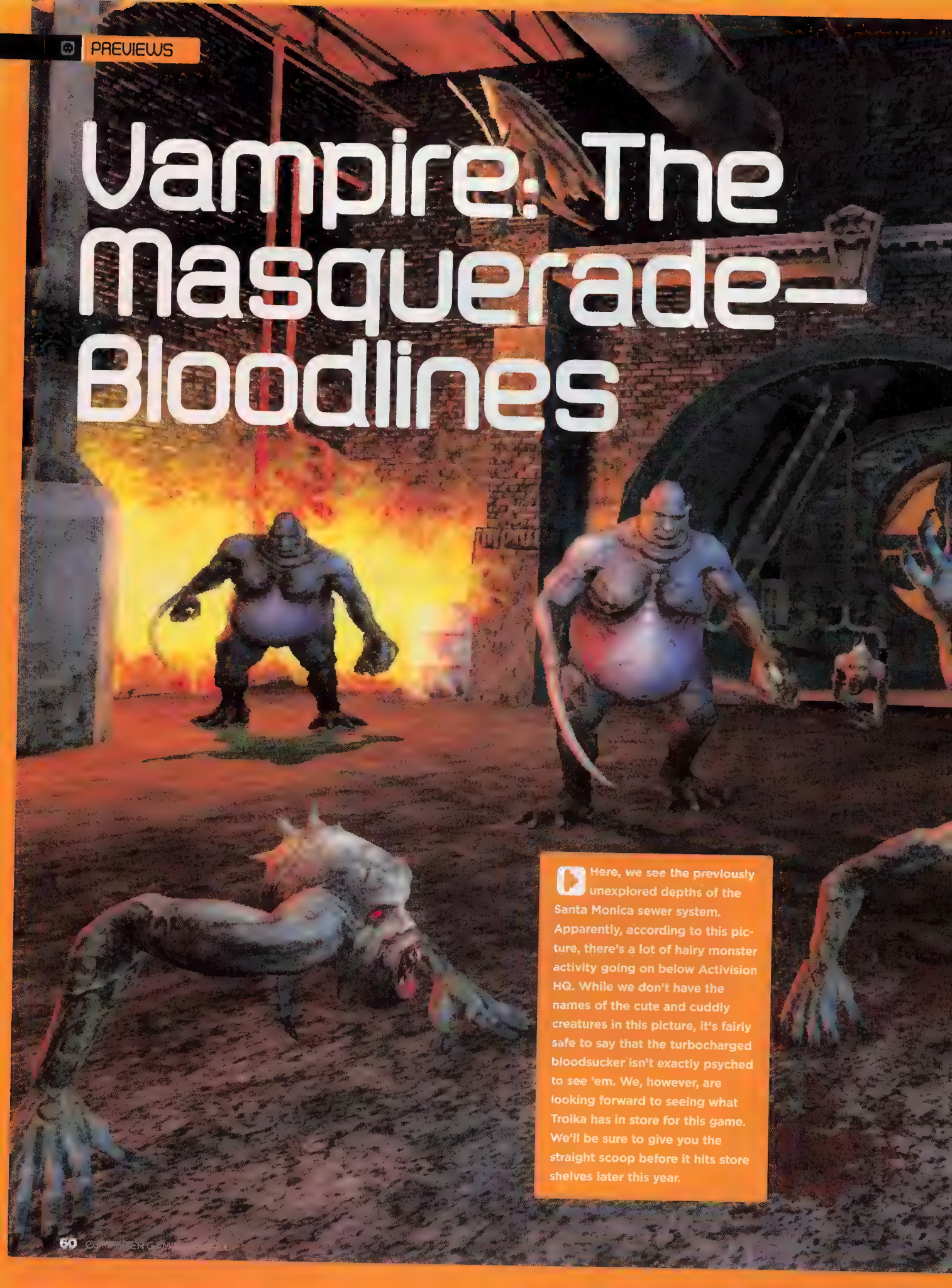
The Word **DIVE BOMB**

PIPELINE

Game	Developer	Expected
Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude	Sierra	Q3 2004
Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle	NCsoft	April 2004
LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth	EA Games	June 2004
Lords of the Realm III	Sierra	April 2004
Manhunt	Rockstar Games	2004
The Matrix Online	Ubisoft	October 2004
Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault	EA Games	March 2004
Men of Valor: Vietnam	Sierra	Q4 2004
Middle-earth Online	Vivendi Universal	September 2004
The Movies	Activision	June 2004
Mythica	Microsoft	October 2004
Operation Flashpoint 2	Codemasters	Q4 2004
Pac-Man World 2	Hip Interactive	April 2004
Painkiller	DreamCatcher Interactive	March 2004
Priest	JC Entertainment	2004
Psychotoxic	CDV	2004
Quake IV	Activision	2004
Rainbow Six 3: Athena Sword	Ubisoft	Q1 2004
Rise of Nations: Throne and Patriots	Microsoft	Q2 2004
Rome: Total War	Activision	Q3 2004
Sam & Max: Freelance Police	LucasArts	Q2 2004
Shade: Wrath of Angels	Cenega	2004
Sid Meier's Pirates!	Atari	2004
Silent Storm: Sentinels	Encore Software	2004
The Sims 2	Electronic Arts	March 2004
Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow	Ubisoft	March 2004
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Oblivion Lost	THQ	September 2004
Star Wars: Battlefront	LucasArts	Q2 2004
Supremacy: Four Paths to Power	Strategy First	Q2 2004
Syberia II	Microids	Q2 2004
Team Fortress 2: Brotherhood of Arms	Sierra	December 2004
Thief: Deadly Shadows	Eidos Interactive	2004
Train Simulator 2	Microsoft	April 2004
Tribes: Vengeance	Sierra	Q4 2004
Trivial Pursuit Unhinged	Atari	March 2004
Ultima X: Odyssey	Electronic Arts	April 2004
Unreal Tournament 2004	Atari	March 2004
Vampire: The Masquerade — Bloodlines	Activision	June 2004
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War	THQ	Q4 2004
Warlords Battlecry III	Enlight Software	Q2 2004
Wartime Command: Battle for Europe 1939-1945	Codemasters	Q2 2004
World of WarCraft	Blizzard Entertainment	June 2004

New **Update**

Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines



Here, we see the previously unexplored depths of the Santa Monica sewer system. Apparently, according to this picture, there's a lot of hairy monster activity going on below Activision HQ. While we don't have the names of the cute and cuddly creatures in this picture, it's fairly safe to say that the turbocharged bloodsucker isn't exactly psyched to see 'em. We, however, are looking forward to seeing what Troika has in store for this game. We'll be sure to give you the straight scoop before it hits store shelves later this year.

PUBLISHER: **Playlogic International** DEVELOPER: **Khaeon** GENRE: **Third-person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **March 2004**

Alpha Black Zero: Intrepid Protocol

In space, no one can hear you shoot

Surely you are asking yourself, "What exactly is an 'Alpha Black Zero' and what makes this particular protocol intrepid?" We're going to try to set the record straight here.

Little-known (at least here in the United States) publisher Playlogic is taking a bold shot into new territory with this third-person tactical shooter. In this sci-fi future world, you and your team are sent out to various planets to uncover—what else?—a spacey conspiracy. That's the best kind! Your mission is to find out who is trying to frame you, why they are trying to frame you, and, of course, hopefully to clear your name in the process.

To that end, you've got four soldiers to arm and command on the battlefield. Opt for tactical infiltration or just lay waste to anything that moves. And while we like the directional-pointing-style commands of EA's *Freedom Fighters*, *Alpha Black Zero*'s more varied and realistic military-style commands lend a more exacting edge to the gameplay.

Command your team with a number of different directives, including orders for multiple kinds of cover fire and various tactical movements, ranging from "hold position and regroup" to "suppressive versus precision fire." *Freedom Fighters* did it with smooth action; *Alpha Black Zero* looks to do it with realism.

"Hey! Don't shoot! I'm on your side!"

No "I" in team

The brutal enemy A.I. will do everything it can to impede your intrepid protocol, and your opponents have a huge advantage in numbers. Thankfully, your computerized teammates do an uncanny job of covering your six—and each other's. Remember, there's no "I" in team—if you try running and gunning through an entire mission all by your lonesome, you'll quickly be pushing up daisies.

OK, so there aren't actually any daisies rendered in the game world's mountainous countryside, but the landscape is littered with grass that sways lightly in the wind. The expansive environments feel as if someone ran their thumb through a giant slab of clay, carving out undulating valleys and hills. In the distance, you can see mountain ranges kissed by a warm sun.

The gorgeous view is courtesy of Croteam's advanced terrain renderer, but it's *Serious Sam*'s Serious engine that makes up *Alpha Black Zero*'s backbone, supporting its large, open worlds. The look and feel is vastly different from anything Croteam (*Sam*'s developer) did with the source materials.

Right now, this detail looks like it's coming at a cost. There are a few hang-ups and lags, though that's expected of a mid-development game. And the aiming mechanism currently feels like too much counterbalance has been forced in, causing your crosshairs to wobble a lot. Additional in-between animations would also help things along; a soldier bumping his way down a hillside just looks odd. And, noticeably, when you move, the grass stops animating.

While it doesn't look like you'll be able to deathmatch, there will be a five-player co-op mode that could prove to be interesting. Will this derail the game? Who knows...just look for *ABZ: Intrepid Protocol* on shelves roughly when this issue hits newsstands. **Johnny Liu**

Serious Sam's Serious engine makes up ABZ's backbone...which has a look and feel that is vastly different from what you saw in Serious Sam.

The Word **INTREPID**

PUBLISHER **ENCORE** DEVELOPER **Monte Cristo** GENRE **Tactical RTS** RELEASE DATE **Spring 2004**

Desert Rats vs. Afrika Korps

Getting your just deserts

World War II wasn't just about Europe and Asia. There were many important battles that took place in the heart of Afrika. No, that's not a typo. Native Afrikans will point out the "K" spelling is closer to the traditional continental language. Older natives might even be able to regale you with stories of the raging fights across the desert sands.

A real-time strategy game set in North Africa during the World War II era, *Desert Rats vs. Afrika Korps* is based upon the real campaigns to defeat Irwin "The Desert Fox" Rommel. You choose to be part of the British Desert Rats or to play as one of those rotten, no-good Nazis. Depending on your alignment, you play the flip sides of 20 tactical battles, each rife with explosions and detail. Cue the destruction.

Visually, *Desert Rats* can fill an entire screen with legions of armored vehicles and troops that leave clouds of dust across the desert in their wake. The animation details lend a compelling sense of realism: When you direct a large huddle of tanks toward a distant attack point, you can see each tank realistically backing up and turning, moving as though they're piloted by individual people, not just moving from A to B. That attention to detail is evident throughout what we've seen of the game.

One tank, lots of potential roadkill.

The ability to pilot different vehicles helps set this RTS apart from the crowd.

The ability to pilot different vehicles is an element that sets this game apart from a stale RTS crowd. For example, in order to control any of the more than 70 vehicles, you must move your soldiers and various infantry into empty seats. It's simple on the surface, but the exchange-rate structure of soldiers to vehicles is important to surviving and winning. Let's say, for example, you have a fully staffed panzer. Start yanking out troops and your vehicle won't operate at peak proficiency. One soldier gone, you take an accuracy penalty. Two soldiers out and maneuverability is cut down. You get the idea. You're forced to consider not only how to use the vehicles, but also how to staff and support them. Of course, it goes without saying that winning comes down to a combination of critical placement maneuvers and proper timing, plus a smidge of turn-based precision wrapped in the option to pause the action and plan out three moves ahead.

A few tweaks could really bolster *Desert Rats vs. Afrika Korps*. The narrative scenes utilize the same engine as the gameplay, and the characters are tiny models, even when you're zoomed all the way in. It's hard to empathize when you struggle to attach the voices to the characters. Also, there seems to be a little slowdown whenever you empty a vehicle of troops.

Not only do you need to rally the troops, but you also need to make sure they hop onboard.

While we haven't had the chance to fire up much multiplayer, there is talk of a capture-the-flag match and a base-versus-base fight (Tobruk versus El Alemein), as well as the option for four would-be generals to lead the charge against each other. Expect the game to be out in early spring of 2004. Look for a really big box on the store shelf—what else could house a title of that size? **Johnny Liu**

The Word: KOOL KOMBAT

DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

Games on the horizon, out of sight

FROM: **Boolat Games** AVAILABILITY **April 2004**

Lagsters

Word on the street: : Once upon a time, British outfit Attention to Detail made waves with futuristic racer *RollCage*. Then the company died. Picking up the slack is Ukrainian developer Boolat, whose new tube-situated speedster seems a stunning tribute to a fallen franchise. Grease monkeys outfit a vehicle with customizable weapon, engine, and tire readouts, then zoom through 32 roly-poly stages that include sewer shafts and abandoned factory pipelines. Eight can play via LAN, kicking the fun into maximum overdrive.
Sounds kinda beat: Arcade racers seldom draw a crowd—the *RollCage* series didn't fade into oblivion on a whim. Most of these futuristic racers (like F-zero) make their home on console systems. Boolat has two other titles in production (neither of which has garnered an American publishing deal as of press time, mind you), straining the diminutive firm's already limited resources. And we're dubious of an Eastern European–manufactured title unseating Rollcage, the greatest trip-hop track star ever.

FROM: **Reality Flux** AVAILABILITY: **May 2004**

Circus Tycoon

Word on the street: Calling all freaks! Considering that we're all sideshow attractions here at *CGW*, how can we not get into the idea of controlling carnies? As ringmaster, you'll manage a rickety sideshow or three-ring circus, building an empire on the backs of bearded women and dog-faced boys. Throughout a 15-scenario campaign, you'll hire Ringling Bros. rejects, design animal menageries, and craft marketing materials and choreograph acts for more than 60 performers, including strongmen and lion tamers. Player bathroom breaks or no, the show must go on....
Sounds kinda beat: Apart from surefire smash hits *Red Light Tycoon* and *Drug Tzar*, the financial-mogul genre is looking short on funds. Hardly aiding the situation is the fact that the product's primary audience is children, and yet, as a comprehensive simulation, the game is likely better suited for adults. Creator Reality Flux is a newcomer on the interactive entertainment scene, with no proven track record—plus, they're Canadian, so we hate them on principle already. (Kidding! We love you, ya crazy Canucks!)

FROM: **Silver Style Entertainment** AVAILABILITY: **April 2004**

The Fall: Last Days of Gaia

Word on the street: With *Fallout 3* canned, the prospect of a postapocalyptic RPG has us mutants salivating. Following a nonlinear tale set in the year 2087 in a world controlled by roving gangs, you'll recruit up to six mercenaries and then hit the road. More than 300 weapon and armor choices supplement a sprawling adventure flush with real-time and turn-based battles. Give *Mad Max* our best—if you're not too busy washing the blood from your chaps.
Sounds kinda beat: German collective Silver Style Entertainment didn't do former publishing partner Simon & Schuster any favors with the critically acclaimed but commercially underrated *Soldiers of Anarchy*, and its latest undertaking doesn't scream "mass-market sensation," either. But given the recent demise of Black Isle Studios, the timing could be just right for the developer to sneak in a sleeper hit.

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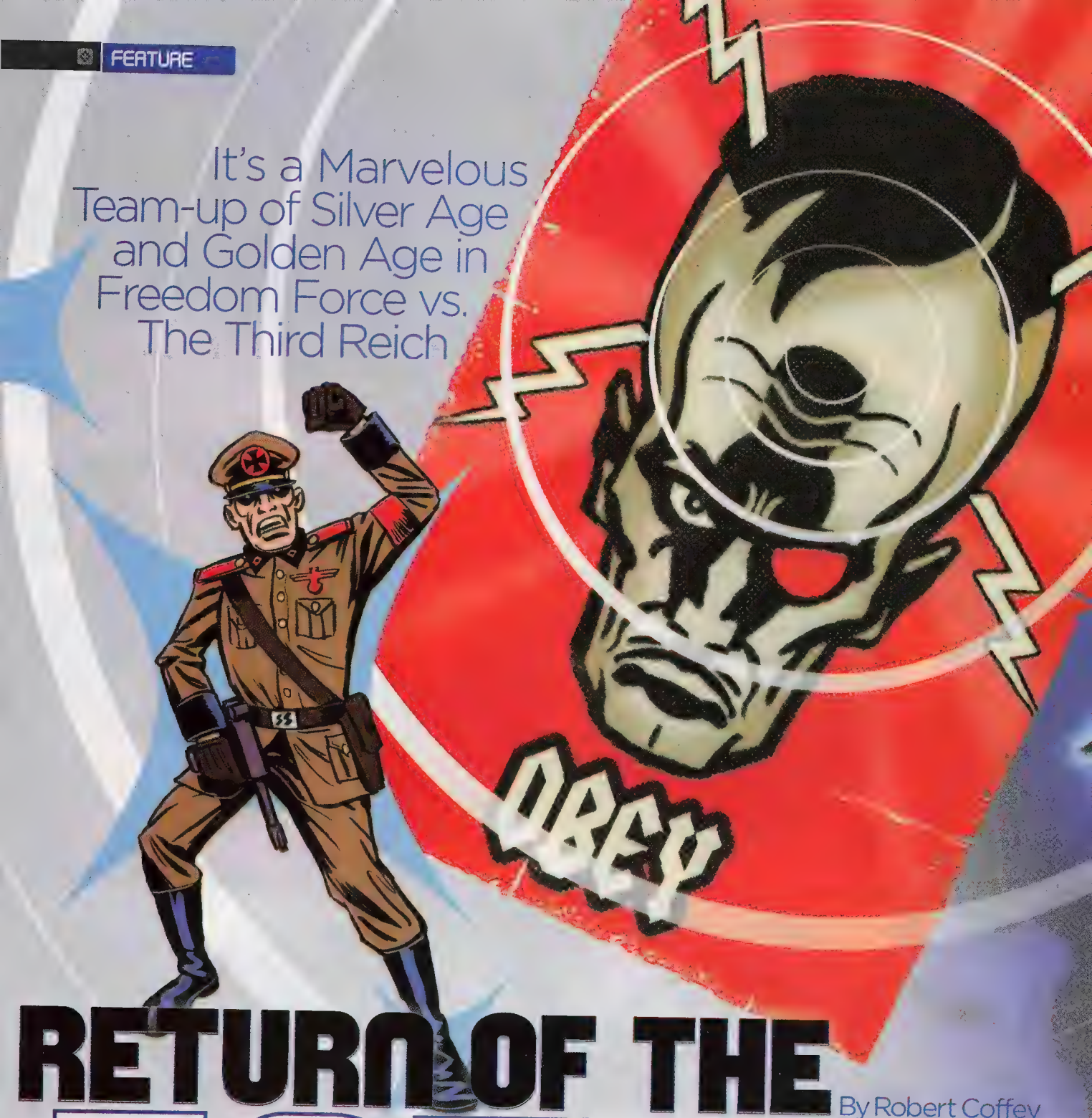


RETURN OF THE ENERGY

By Robert Coffey

PUBLISHER: (To be determined) DEVELOPER Irrational Games GENRE Strategy RELEASE DATE: Q3 2004

-X MEN

He meets you in the hushed corridors of your citadel, the shining beacon of hope that stands as a monument to democracy, justice, and all-around fair play. A former colleague on the Manhattan Project, he urgently informs you that your archenemy, the frostbitten fearmonger known as Nuclear Winter, has not only escaped but has also stolen the body of the insanely powerful Time Master and fled to Cuba. There is no time to waste, the man urges you. You must make haste to Cuba and stop Nuclear Winter before he unleashes unspeakable horrors, horrors too horrible to imagine....

Now, mere mortals such as you and me might be inclined to question such fantastic information, but when you're the sort of guy who calls himself Minuteman and runs around in a spandex American flag and a tricornered hat while shouting "For freedom!" you're more than a little susceptible when someone appeals to your sense of patriotism. *Of course* you'll go, and you'll bring your superpowered friends with you to boot!

So begins the amazing adventures of *Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich,* the second saga of the comic-book hero team awarded *CGW*'s Strategy Game of the Year award in 2002. And while the game still has a ways to go before release, it already looks outstanding.

Secret origins

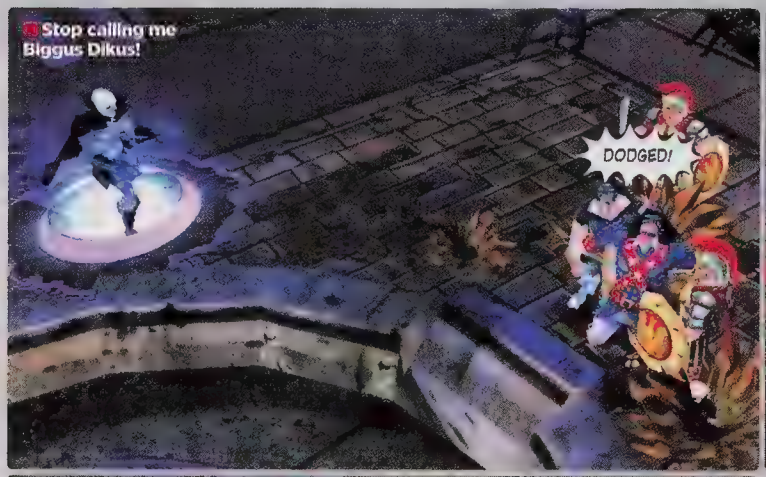
If only superpatriot Minuteman knew that his old friend Charles Wilson was not what he seems. If only he could tell that Wilson was diabolically manipulating him to seize Time Master for himself, so he can travel back in time to World War II and give the Axis powers the precious Energy X to create a new race of supervillains. If only Minuteman knew that Charles Wilson was actually the big-brained Nazi supervillain Blitzkrieg!

Yep, that same breathless, over-the-top comic-book homage/parody story line that worked so well in the first *Freedom Force* is back with a vengeance in the new game, and if

Evil Minion
Shurale

These abominable snowmen possess unimaginable strength and wield it at the behest of Nuclear Winter.

Don't let the jodhpurs and capes fool you—these guys are seriously tough.



Superhero Sky King

The Bullet's childhood hero rains down justice from above, using his jetpack to incapacitate Axis minions with a Sonic Boom...and his twin arm-mounted machine guns.

anything, it promises to be even bigger and bolder this time around. The first series of missions (set in a deliriously colorful Cuba) against the evil sorceress Red October is just the tip of the iceberg in a story that has Mentor sending Freedom Force members back in time, Alchemiss receiving intriguing dream messages from the interdimensionally exiled Manbot, and a confrontation late in the game with a mysterious race of subterraneans. Whew! What's left?

In a number of ways, *Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich* is more of the same—but in the "more content done even better" way, rather than the "more of the same stuff regurgitated" way. The most obvious addition to the series is the inclusion of Golden Age heroes and villains. Drawing inspiration from Nazi-bashing World War II–era comics and featuring dialogue ripped from *Sgt. Rock,* this fall 2004 release contains six new heroes (three each from the Golden and Silver Ages) and four new villains as part of 25 to 30 new characters overall, including evil henchmen like the giant power-beam-shooting eyeball, Eye of the Reich. Each new hero comes complete with his or her own tongue-in-cheek origin story, told through uncanny reproductions of period comics.

League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (and Women)

In keeping with the flavor of the era, the heroes of the Golden Age will be primarily gadgeteers, do-gooders who use wit and ingenuity to smash evil. Each of the new heroes represents a WWII-era Allied country: the Rocketeer-like Sky King is American, the wily Black Jack is English, and the swordswoman Trecolour hails from France. Each hero battles with a very personalized tool set; for example, Sky King relies heavily on his rocket-pack to fly and attack, while Trecolour uses her razor-sharp foil to eviscerate her foes and blind them by reflecting light off its polished blade.

Superhero
Green Genie

This mischievous, chaos-sowing enchantress uses transformative powers to create heroic doppelgangers who do her fighting.

Evil Minion
Kill-A-Rilla

One of Blitzkrieg's many abominations, these guys are half man, half ape, and all bad.

Superhero
Black Jack

The wry British superagent is a master of gadgetry and part of an underground resistance sworn to defend the world from the evil Reich. He blinds his enemies with Fawkes' Flashers and takes 'em down with acid-tipped playing cards.

Tombstone unleashes yet more spookifying powers.

The new villains, similarly, represent Axis countries, with evil mentalist Blitzkrieg fighting for Germany, Red Sun battling on behalf of the Japanese empire, and the blustery Fortissimo singing (yes, singing—he's a mutated operatic tenor) for Italy. Where's Russia? Sadly, on the side of evil, with a much nastier version of Nuclear Winter running amok.

One major difference between the Golden Age heroes and villains: The bad guys have Energy X-granted powers, so their abilities tend to be considerably more unique. Red Sun isn't just one guy, he's six guys with individual powers; when one falls, the others heal and absorb his powers, until finally, you're battling one very powered-up bad guy. On the other hand, the Golden Age heroes don't have to worry about managing their Energy X consumption and can instead rely on their bottomless utility belts.

The original Freedom Force members and the new Silver Age good guys—the brooding Tombstone, the shaman Quetzalcoatl, and the magical Green Genie—still need to keep an eye on the Energy X status bar, though the Silver Age heroes will boast powers that will more than make up for the added monitoring. For example, Tombstone, the avenger from beyond the grave, not only passively radiates an aura of fear, he can also possess and control enemies. (He may also possess a zombification ability

Golden Age heroes will be primarily gadgeteers, do-gooders who use wit and ingenuity to smash evil.

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Comic Book Guy(s)

Behind every game toils a host of secret identities. The key mystery men behind *Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich* are producer and writer Ken Levine and lead designer Dorian Hart.

Comics have been an influence in both of their lives for years. Says Levine: "My first real run-in with comics was with Golden Age characters. There was a hardcover compilation of old *Superman* and *Batman* comics in my local library. I loved it, especially how dark the *Batman* stuff was—the Joker was killing people with his smiley-face nerve gas! This wasn't the the Batman I saw on the '60s television show. This was great stuff."

So, which comics had the most impact on this dynamic duo? Read on, true believers, read on!

Ken Levine's Top Five

The Batman Adventures: Mad Love: A love story for psychopaths. You haven't lived until you've seen Harley Quinn's notions of domestic bliss.

Astro City: Because it contrasts the hugeness of the heroes with the smallness of the people who live among them.

The Fantastic Four: The original run of *The FF* redefined what comics could be—and the Invisible Girl had a cool beehive hairdo.

Claremont/Byrne's Uncanny X-Men: This was one of the first comics to really treat characters as adults. They got to swear, drink beer, have sex, and be truly unhappy in very grown-up ways.

Alias: Because it's the only comic I know in which Luke Cage isn't forced to say "Cripes!" when he curses.

Dorian Hart's Top Five

Watchmen: The constant and finely crafted juxtapositions of narrative and imagery really opened my eyes to how powerful the combination could be.

Sandman #4, Season of Mists: This was my first exposure to the *Sandman* books, and Neil Gaiman's universe, with its jumble of pantheons, appealed to me greatly.

Books of Magic, Vol. 3: A guilty pleasure, I guess. I'm a sucker for this sort of thing.

Fantastic Four, The Trial of Galactus: One of the great superhero teams of all time, and this one comic arc,

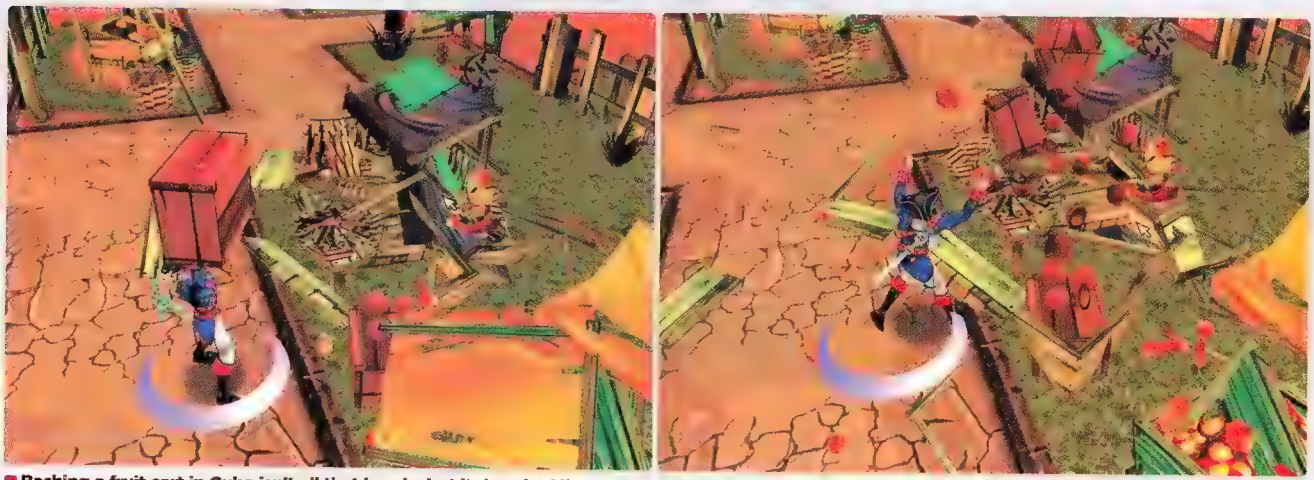
Sandman #10, The Wake: A powerful and satisfying conclusion to a mind-blowingly creative series...and Charles Vess is my favorite illustrator of the set.

Superhero Tombstone

Unjustly sent to the electric chair for the murder of his wife, Nathan Graves becomes the masked hero with powers from beyond the grave...and guns. He radiates an aura of fear and can control enemies with his power of Ghostly Possession.

that lets him raise fallen enemies to fight alongside him—Irrational is still debating this feature.) In fact, the new characters enjoy a slew of new powers, from heroes with the ability to turn allies into functioning clones of each other to enemies who turn your forces into toads.

Unfortunately, you can add the lack of new powers for existing characters to your potential disappointment list. And, while fans have longed for combination powers, à la the Wolverine/Colossus "Fastball Special," *Freedom Force*'s game engine just isn't up to it. However, you'll still be able to enjoy leveling up the old heroes and deciding what sort of characters they'll be, since they'll start the game at roughly 70 percent of full power. And the bruisers (Minuteman, Man O' War, etc.) do get a little bonus—there are tons of new objects, which means more objects to throw and club with, which means more devastation, which means even more objects to throw and club with, which means more POW! BANG! KABOOM!



Bashing a fruit cart in Cuba isn't all that heroic, but it does let Minuteman show off the engine's ability to render tons of objects.

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THE **ADVANCED** XBOX MAGAZINE

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Superhero
Quetzalcoatl

This Aztec shaman wields the power of the sun and can use his Sacrifice power to immediately and fully heal the rest of his team—at the expense of his own consciousness, of course.

Crisis on Infinite Earths

That higher object density is a direct result of the upgraded Gamebryo engine, as are more-detailed textures, improved special effects, snazzier character models, and dramatic 3D building interiors. "Building interiors" may sound underwhelming on paper, but in the game, they add real dynamism to the epic *Freedom Force* brawls: Sides of buildings are torn away to reveal apartments and homes, and a church impacted by a villain-tossed Minuteman has its roof sheared off to reveal the chapel within. All these features are being added with one thing in mind: enhancing combat.

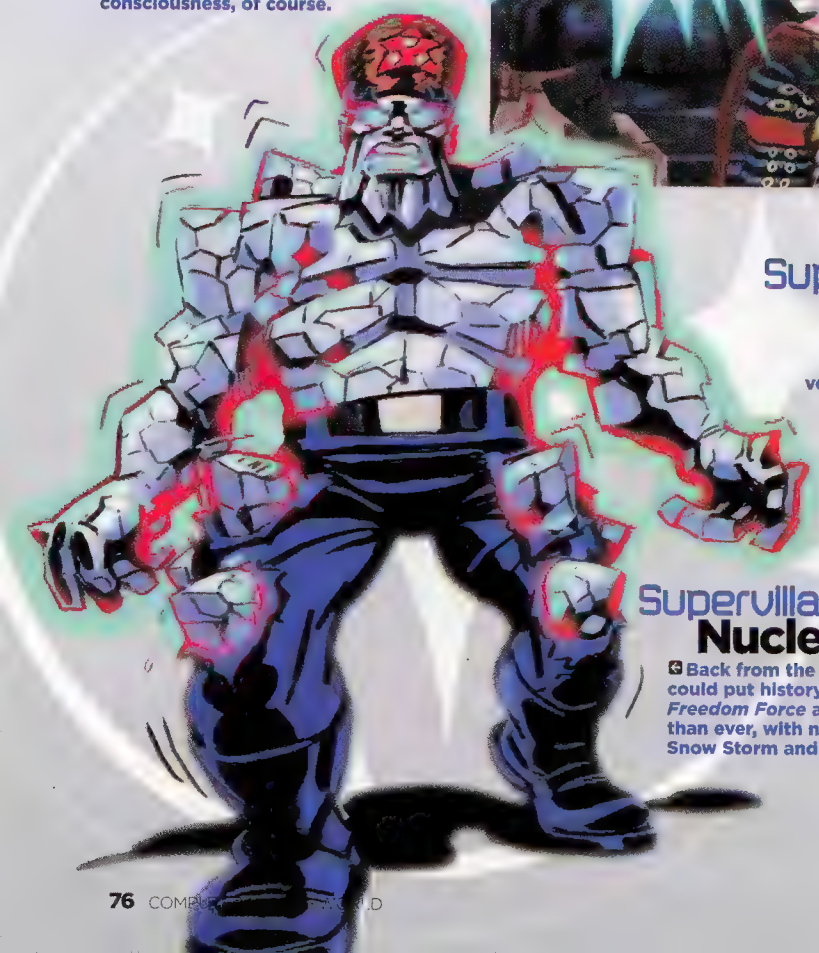
Same goes for the inclusion of vehicles—Freedom Force members will have to contend with relentless panzer tanks, among other modes of transport. We're hoping our heroes can commandeer some vehicles and turn the tables on their enemies, but as of press time, this feature was not yet assured.

As it stands, the biggest combat enhancement isn't one you'll see on your monitor: An overhaul of character A.I. means gamers won't have to baby-sit every single team member scattered across the mission map. Heroes will now defend themselves intelligently, managing their resources so they won't get knocked out when you're distracted by a separate battle—and those actions will be dictated by the character's personality. For example, El Diablo's hotheadedness will be a real gameplay factor, as he'll be inclined to go all out with his attacks when left on his own, with potentially negative fallout such as collateral team damage or knocking himself out. New interface adjustments, including the removal of invalid character actions from the pop-up menu, also help to ensure that combat is never a chore.

Power Pack

Perhaps the only major complaint gamers had with the original *Freedom Force* was the thin selection of multiplayer options. Thankfully, Irrational now has the time to craft the multiplayer package it envisioned for the first game, thereby serving the needs of a rabid fan base and modding community.

In fact, the multiplayer features are arguably the biggest change in the franchise. *Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich* will ship with a number of multiplayer game types, all playable with



Supervillain
Fortissimo

This fat, flying Italian baritone has a deadly voice and an awful temper. Beware of his hero-stunning Song of Pain.

Supervillain
Nuclear Winter

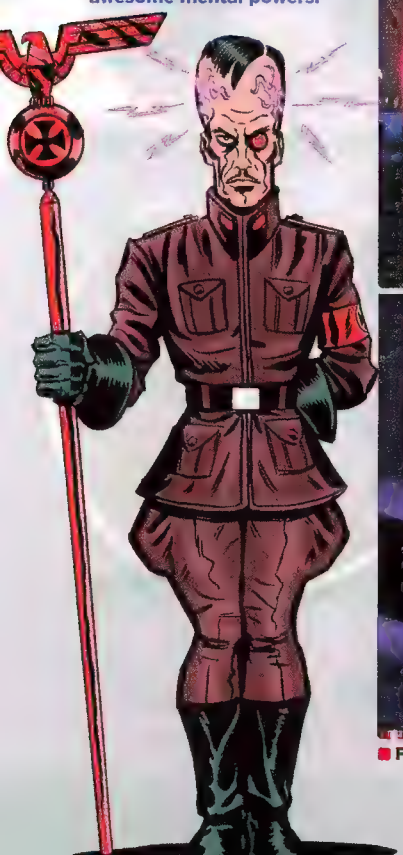
Back from the dead with a plot that could put history on ice, this original *Freedom Force* archenemy is stronger than ever, with new powers such as Snow Storm and Freezing Punch.

either a single character or entire squads. Gamers can expect a last-man-standing variant of standard deathmatch, capture the flag, king of the hill, and two modes of mayhem. Straight mayhem games will be timed contests that continually respawn heroes and keep score based on the damage inflicted, while civilian mayhem games will give each side a certain number of civilians and you'll score by knocking out your opponents' citizens (and/or saving more of your own).

Multiplayer will be launched via an in-game browser instead of the clunky separate executable of the first game. Irrational is also planning to add a similar one-click update/download feature to allow fans to easily grab mods, new skins, etc. The hope is that by making all the game tools available to modders and eliminating the needlessly complicated process of adding content on the user end, this *Freedom Force* will enjoy an even longer life on your hard drive.

Frankly, we can't wait. This game should be like kryptonite to boredom.

Freedom Force members will have to work together to defeat their new, tougher foes.



Supervillain Blitzkrieg

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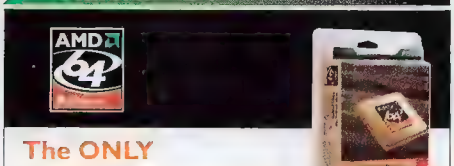

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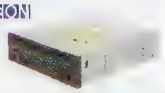
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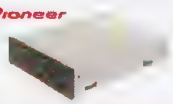
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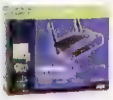
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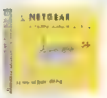
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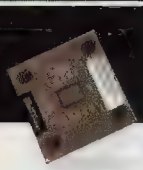

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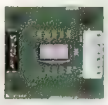
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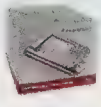
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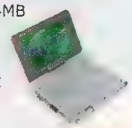
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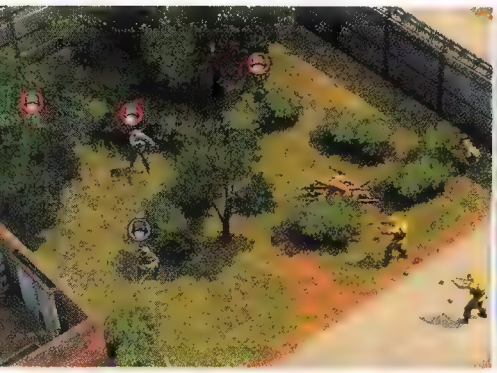
The engine is just as capable at the little stuff as the big stuff—check out the bullet marks, blood trail, and shattered [illegible]

PUBLISHER: **Encore/JoWood Productions** DEVELOPER: **Nival Interactive** GENRE: **Tactical Strategy** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium II 600, 128MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 2.5GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

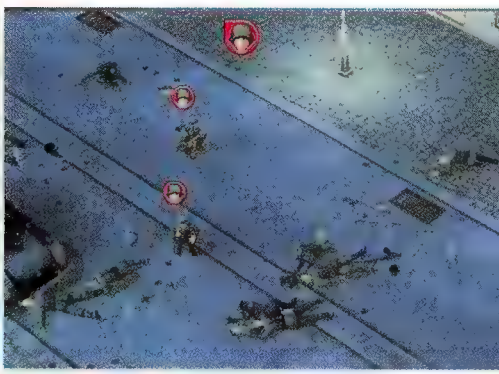
Silent Storm

How silent can a storm be when you've got bazookas?



At times, Allied A.I. units will fight alongside you. They're good, not great, but they do a fantastic job absorbing bullets that might have gone into your team.

The appearance of Panzerkleins and ray guns late in the game rings false and makes the missions much, much harder.



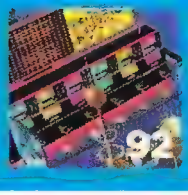
Send more Nazis! Pinned down behind a building, my team fends off waves of Germans responding to the noise in the street.

91

Black Hawk Down: Team Sabre
Delta Force is back in action—and it's good!

84

Terminator 3: War of the Machines
A game so bad, it's post-apocalyptic scenes seem like paradise.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Vegas Tycoon
Luck be a lady tonight! Let's keep this party polite!

After countless missteps by countless developers, we can finally say it: The spiritual heir to *X-Com* has at last arrived. *Silent Storm* isn't perfect—it's got some significant missteps of its own—but there is so much done so right here that it makes for an insanely addicting must-have title full of the riveting gameplay and memorable moments that mark it as an early front-runner for 2004's Strategy Game of the Year. So, yeah, you should be buying this one. Right away.

War is heck

While there are two campaigns (Axis and Allies), the basics of *Silent Storm* don't change: You put together and command a squad of up to six elite commandos, each with different special abilities, and fight across Europe. The missions take place in a variety of environments, from enormous factories to quaint villages to secluded fortress-like estates, but one thing is constant throughout: tough, brutal firefights that demand tactical acumen, smart unit deployment, and more than a bit of timely, ass-saving luck.

While the scripted missions are uniformly great, the random missions you can opt for while trekking across the map are less so, but they're crucial for gameplay, since they let you develop your characters further (more on that later). Too many of the mission objectives hinge on needle-in-a-haystack searches for important documents, but that irritant is more than offset by the virtually relentless action that pulses through the game. Every mission offers new challenges and experiences: You wage a vicious, bloody street fight in one, only to desperately claw your way out of a seemingly hopeless, pinned-down position in the next. Whether you're sweeping a town of Germans or blasting your way into a heavily fortified position, *Silent Storm* is loaded with the sort of gaming moments you don't forget.

A lot of that is due to a truly remarkable engine. Sure, it looks great at higher detail levels and sports a great zoom feature that lets you burrow deep into the action, but it's the possibilities it provides that give the game so much of its flavor. With very few exceptions, everything in the world is destructible. *Everything.* The game world immediately begins to reflect the conflict you wage, with every bullet hole, every bloodstain, every bit of rubble blasted from a collapsed floor persisting. Need to breach a building? You can go through the window or the front door, or you can just blow a big freaking hole in the side and charge in with guns blazing. It's impossible to overstate the sense of drama the engine allows—you'll just have to have your sniper take out an enemy and watch as his body is blown through a window, falls three stories, and shatters a café table to fully understand.

Personnel file

As if all the flanking, feinting, and fighting weren't enough, the RPG character development in *Silent Storm* gives you another rich layer of strategizing to deal with. You create one primary character and add others to your squad from a wide selection of potential teammates, each representing one of six fighter classes (soldier, sniper, engineer, etc.). Each character has a skill set that accrues experience through use, so if you want that pansy-ass medic to shoot better, put a gun in her hands and start firing. Additionally, each class has a sprawling set of perks, one of which you can select every time you level up. There are real choices to be made here, allowing you to almost custom design subclasses within each class. Throw in a huge assortment of weapons to outfit your squad with and you've got plenty to do and manage before, during, and after the firefights.

Self-inflicted wound

With so much done so well, it's a real shame that *Silent Storm* suffers from some pretty traditional problems. For one thing, as muscular as the game engine is, it needs something pretty powerful to run it, and even then there aren't any guarantees about performance. Framerates dragged on a Pentium 4 1.8GHz machine; who knows what you'd get on the laughably alleged minimum system of a Pentium II 600?

Gameplay was much better on a Pentium 4 2.8GHz, but even then, the game crashed to the desktop repeatedly on one bigger mission featuring lots of collateral damage. After ratcheting the video options down to where the action looked like stick figures spitting watermelon seeds at each other, I could complete the mission and beef up the graphics again in the following mission.

The RTS-style unit band-boxing feature and *Diablo II*–style text-item pick-up feature are appreciated, but the engine doesn't distinguish where items are in three-dimensional space, thus creating instances in which you lasso four squaddies instead of two because a couple were downstairs, or you send a guy from the basement to the roof to grab a grenade you thought was by his feet.

But worse, late in the game *Silent Storm* falls victim to the nerd imperative of sci-fi elements that, though some gamers may enjoy, I found totally unnecessary and detrimental. After fighting so many tough, gritty urban battles, the introduction of Panzerkleins (powered li'l mech-like weaponized body armor) and ray guns struck a really sour note and seriously undermined the great WWII feeling the game had created up to that point.

It's not as jarring as, say, having your squad suddenly become a mariachi band that uses the joyful power of festive music to defeat evil, but it still feels wrong. At any rate, there's no denying that these late-game additions seriously unbalance what had been a beautifully constructed game to that point, thus making the very final missions almost unenjoyably tough.

But I got over that, and you should, too. Even with these shortcomings, *Silent Storm* is the sort of game that has you thirsting for the expansion moments after you complete it. **Robert Coffey**

With very few exceptions, everything in the world is destructible. *Everything.*

Verdict ★★★★½

Not perfect but pretty damn close, *Silent Storm* is like a gorgeous WWII mod for the revered *X-Com*. Not to be missed.

PUBLISHER: **Cenega Publishing** DEVELOPER: **Plastic Reality Technologies** GENRE: **Strategy** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 733, 128MB RAM, 1GB install, 32MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

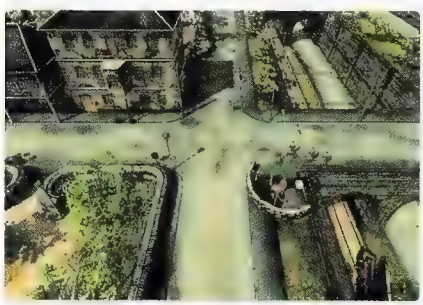
Korea: Forgotten Conflict

Suicide is painless

K*orea: Forgotten Conflict* focuses on a war that is often overshadowed by World War II and the Vietnam War. In fact, I learned everything I know about the Korean conflict from episodes of *M*A*S*H*. Plastic Reality has made an admirable effort not only to entertain the player, but also to educate with war footage and informative narratives; unfortunately, while the game works as an educational tool, it falls short as entertainment.

See no evil, hear no evil

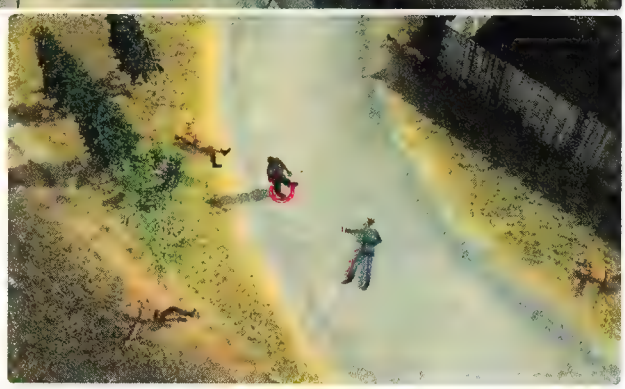
I can find no fault with *Forgotten Conflict*'s graphics or sound, as each works to immerse the player in Korea's bloody struggle. Your missions take you from Wolmi Island to Antung to perform a variety of objectives, including stealing a MiG prototype and liberating a train of POWs. Your commandos can interact with the environment, manning machine-gun nests, uprooting mines and replanting them to foil the enemy, setting explosives, and commandeering enemy vehicles. You can even let your Korean soldier drive a truck while everyone hides in the back in order to cruise past checkpoint guards. However, all these efforts are defeated by the game's rock-dumb A.I. It didn't take me long to discover that the quickest path to the end of any level is simply to shoot my way through. Forget stealth and planning—you can go that route, but why bother? All enemies are deaf and have the attention span of a spider monkey on crack. A soldier will never hear the comrade standing directly behind him take three rounds to the gut and cry out in pain.



Plastic Reality's graphics engine does paint an evocative picture of war-torn Seoul.

We all do our part to help out the Red Cross.

And if he happens to turn around and see the body, his agitation lasts all of five seconds, and then it's business as usual.



Why skulk your way through when you can leave a trail of corpses?

Crass course in casting

Plastic Reality knows how to set the stage, but sabotages its work by filling the cast with uninspired stereotypes to go with the poor A.I. Army Ranger B.J. Goodlover is the African-American from the ghettos of Harlem. Nighthawk, the Native American, fills the role of sniper; all of his dialogue consists of mystic nonsense about his ancestors. Connor MacGregor is the Australian military engineer. Sarah "Honey Bear" Parker is your medic and is on the team because MacGregor will allow only female medics to treat his wounds. Score one for women's rights. Last, but not least, comes Kim "Kato" Yoon-Soo, who is your Korean operative and master of disguise, apparently because he already looks Korean.

Despite all this, each character does function well in gameplay, though there are illogical limitations on skills: Only Nighthawk can fire a sniper rifle (one would think that at least B.J. could), and only MacGregor is trained to use the mine detector (why can't anyone else use what is essentially a metal detector?). However, every commando can use several kinds of firearms, and everyone can perform first aid, though your medic is naturally better at it. Only Kato can disguise himself as a Korean soldier, but that's for obvious reasons.

Korea: Forgotten Conflict is a nice try, Plastic Reality. Keep working at it.

Stephen Gehringer

All enemies are deaf and have the attention span of a spider monkey on crack.

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

This *Commandos* clone does a great job creating a vibrant game world, then undoes it with horrible A.I.

PUBLISHER: **Battlefront.com** DEVELOPER: **Battlefront.com** GENRE: **Turn-based Historical War Game** ESRB RATING: **None** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 500, 64MB RAM, 1.2GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 800, 128MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **2 via e-mail, LAN/Internet, hotseat**

Combat Mission: Afrika Korps

Not quite worth reenlistment

C*ombat Mission*'s pedigree as the game that forever altered war-gaming remains unchanged. The simultaneous-movement system that brought the 3D battlefield to life without trivializing it remains unchanged. Unfortunately, the game engine remains unchanged as well. The graphics are upgraded but still feel dated, and in the absence of any gameplay improvements, *Combat Mission: Afrika Korps* feels suspiciously like a scenario pack.

The *Combat Mission* series is ostensibly about realistic infantry combat, but it's the armor system that has best lent itself to the kind of rigorous mathematical modeling the game is based on. *Afrika Korps'* focus on the North African and Italian campaigns plays directly to this strength, which makes it all the more surprising that the scenarios aren't more compelling. Effects like dust clouds thrown up by vehicles make for a gritty battlefield, but aside from new goodies like multi-turreted tanks to play with, this could have been called *Combat Mission 2.1*. The A.I. remains questionable, and many scenarios seem designed to redress this by stacking the deck against one side or the other, rendering them unplayable in multiplayer. Multiplayer is a joy, but this isn't a change, just a testament to the quality of the system introduced more than three years ago. Even the thin 30-page manual feels like an afterthought; the full manual is reduced to PDF.

This "standalone" expansion doesn't require either of the previous two games, but new players would be better advised to pick up *Combat Mission: Barbarossa to Berlin* for its more interesting scenarios. For long-time fans of the series, it's a worthwhile purchase, but true advances to the series remain in the future. ⊠ **Bruce Geryk**

This could have been called *Combat Mission 2.1*.

With the lack of cover in the desert, infantry have few places to hide and plenty of places to die.

Verdict ★★★☆☆

Scenario-pack content at a full-game price.

PUBLISHER: **Diversions Entertainment** DEVELOPER: **Diversions Entertainment** GENRE: **Fighting** ESRB RATING: **T**
Pentium III 733, 128MB RAM, 1GB install RECOMMENDED: **1.0+ GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Online, LAN (2-16 players)**

One Must Fall: Battlegrounds

What if two were to fall?

O*h my freak! Would you check out this game's acronym? OMFBG! But, it looks like one too many letters got in there. What does the "B" stand for? After fighting in the robot arena of death that is *One Must Fall*, I'm inclined to say "B" stands for "Blah."*

OMFBG has its roots in a shareware game from the mid '90s known as *One Must Fall: 2097*. Like its predecessor, OMFBG is a 2D, [illegible] fighting game. You choose between several fighting mechs, all of which look fantastic and have names. After that, it's time for some mech-on-mech action.

The single-player story mode has no real story but nicely frames the fights and matches. My personal favorite comes from Professor [illegible] scientist: "Your chemical cocktail cannot overcome the will of a cat herder. Sorry." I think I need a chemical cocktail of my own.

As you hammer away at the keys amidst pumping, awesome music and explosive graphics, the robots start with just a small range of moves. Instead of *Street Fighter*-style joystick motions, the vast majority of special moves are done by [illegible] combinations. There are the basics of projectiles and combos, pooled from two punches and two kicks. There are also jump and dash toggles. There's supposedly an [illegible] to the fighting, but it just feels like button-mashing. Even with a [illegible] which is far better than I'm admitting to [illegible], it just doesn't feel very [illegible].

Until some breakout game truly [illegible] otherwise, joysticks and control pads are a deal for traditional fighting games—a keyboard just doesn't cut it. The mouse could have been implemented for FPS [illegible] fighting, but it's limited to [illegible].

What redeems the game from a total [illegible] is the ability to [illegible] with some competition. It supports up to 16 players, but expect a considerable [illegible]. Thanks to the [illegible] feature [illegible] the three battles that have been [illegible] games, but new players would be better advised to pick up *Combat Mission: Barbarossa to Berlin* for its more interesting scenarios. For long-time fans of the series, it's a worthwhile purchase, but true advances to the series remain in the future. ⊠ **Johnny Liu**

Boys, boys, don't fight. I'll dance with you both.

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

Well, you can play online, but c'mon—there are better fighters aplenty elsewhere.

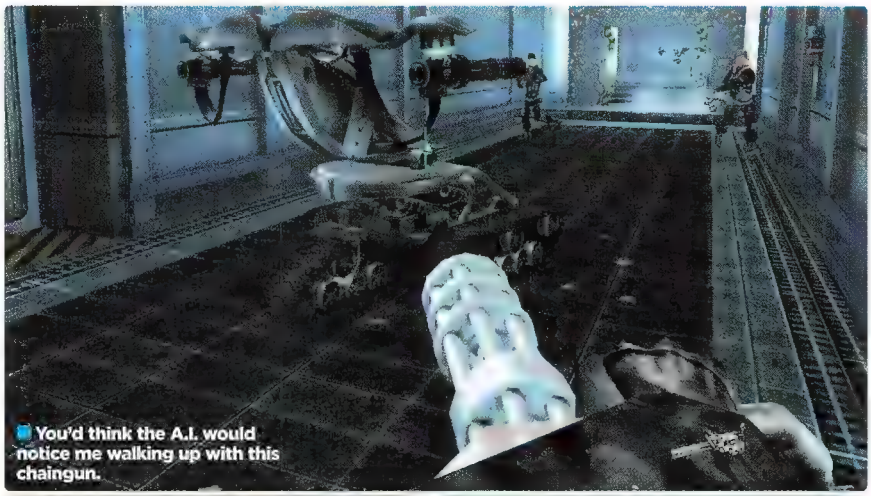
PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Clever's Games, LTD** GENRE: **Multiplayer Shooter** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 128MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 1GB Install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **LAN, Internet (2-32 players)**

Terminator 3: War of the Machines

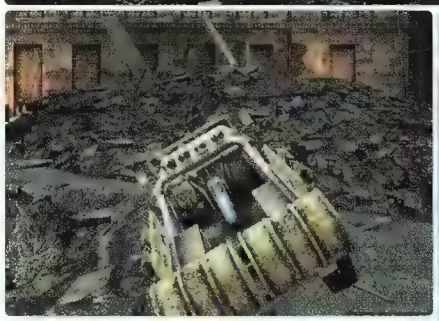
Some games just shouldn't be made

This game is just plain horrible. While games based on movie licenses have a terrible track record, *Terminator 3: War of the Machines* takes the cake. You heard it here folks, this game's only redeeming quality is that I didn't have to pay for it.

Simply put, *Terminator 3: War of the Machines* is a team-based multiplayer game along the lines of *Battlefield 1942* that takes place in the sci-fi world of the *Terminator* movies. The game consists of two sides: Tech-Com are the people and Skynet are the robots. As a Tech-Com human, you're supposed to be protecting John Connor, I guess. The thing is, the game simply drops you into the action without giving you any idea why you'd even care. Once you choose your side, you're given the chance to choose a character class. The Tech-Com side has your typical selection: hunter, heavy hunter, scout...you get the picture. Hell, if you kick a ton of ass (which isn't that hard), you can even play as Arnold Schwarzenegger. He's faster than normal humans and has better armor. Once you're armed, you run out of your base and start killing the Skynet robots. And this is where you really begin to hate this game.



You'd think the A.I. would notice me walking up with this chaingun.



Piloting the vehicles in this atrocious game is pointless. They're slow and unwieldy.

Yes, I am exceedingly fond of the chaingun.

How does the game look?

For starters, this game is hella ugly. While the characters look fine (circa 2000), their animations are atrocious. You'll spend the first few minutes trying to make heads or tails of the pathetically designed level and map that's supposed to help you find the action. In the meantime, you'll wander around aimlessly while you try to figure out where you're supposed to go—this gives you ample time to grow nauseous as your character bobs and weaves through a bombed-out Los Angeles. Once you find the action, you discover that killing the A.I. bots is way too easy—they sort of stand there stiffly, staring at you while you whale away on them, before lamely falling over.

Oh yeah, *Terminator 3: War of the Machines* also has vehicles! Too bad they suck. Sticking with the game's theme of clichés, there's a dune buggy with a machine gun and even a car with a rocket launcher. I spent some time trying to drive the vehicles before I realized I could get to where I needed to go more easily and quickly on foot. And before you criticize me, I'll have you know that the A.I. can't drive the friggin' cars too well, either.

I was surprised that there's no real single-player campaign. You just choose a map and start playing. I was also surprised by the game's limited play modes. You can only play team deathmatch online against the other five people out there who have this game, and you only play against bots in termination mode.

As a Californian, I can't help but wonder if this game was pushed through to take advantage of the fact that Arnold is our governor. The thing is, if you want to see him killing stuff, your best bet is to turn on TNT, Spike, or the Sci-Fi channel. It seems that at least one of his movies is on every day. **William O'Neal**

***Terminator 3: War of the Machines* also has vehicles! Too bad they suck.**

Verdict ★½☆☆☆

This game sucks.

PUBLISHER: **Hip Games** DEVELOPER: **Namco** GENRE: **Action-Adventure** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM, 600MB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 1.8GB install** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Dead to Rights

And dead on arrival

***Dead to Rights* on the PC is nothing more than a budget port of its Xbox forebear—a derivative third-person shooter with a hackneyed gritty-policeman-turned-fugitive plot.**

The game is still clearly held down by its console roots, utilizing the same auto-aim mechanism, save markers instead of points, and a clumsily grafted key-binding system. Auto-aim is especially annoying because it tends to lock on to distant enemies when there's someone plugging away right next to you.

The game's hero, Jack Slate, has a few useful techniques. Aside from the poorly integrated *Max Payne*-style bullet-time dive, Jack has a handy grab move that lets him use opponents as human shields. This becomes necessary as you move deeper into the game, where difficulty simply equals more enemies. And who are those enemies? According to the story, every cop and construction worker you've been bloodily murdering is a convict in a cunning disguise. That kind of over-the-top ridiculousness might lead to a rather painful brain freeze on your part—to say nothing of the repetition you face. Oh, there's a few secondary gameplay styles tossed in, such as some timing games and a *Dance Dance Revolution*-style pole dance, but it's all essentially blasé window dressing.

The game is still clearly held down by its console roots.

The shower room of a prison, with some "friends" running over to greet you.

When you die, the game emphasizes what a failure you are before pushing you through more trial and error. *Dead to Rights* isn't a complete failure, but it's still not worth the try. **Johnny Liu**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

A no-frills port of an aged, derivative, repetitive shooter.

PUBLISHER: **Ottava** DEVELOPER: **Auran** GENRE: **Railroad Sim** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 733, 256MB RAM, 1.2GB install, 32MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Trainz 2004

The little simulator that could

The original *Trainz* proved to be a great little construction set for the would-be model railroader, but actual gameplay was limited. This version adds new scenarios that provide satisfied challenges for budding locomotive engineers. Challenges range from keeping a passenger train on schedule to managing traffic at a busy steel mill. New in-game worries such as waybill management, safety, and multiple A.I. drivers all serve to keep you on your toes.

Between scenario sessions, you can simply drive around admiring the scenery in driver mode. Auran has substantially beefed up the *Trainz* graphics engine, which now supports DirectX 9 shaders for better water and atmospheric effects. However, it continues to be the eye candy, some scenarios will stutter and crawl—but they're sure pretty. Auran also added animated effects like cool bang sparks and flames for greater immersion. Most of *Trainz* is playable in either DCC (radio controlled) or standard mode (more realistic).

But the heart of the sim is the ability to create complex railroad layouts and scenarios. The basic 24-page manual helps orient you to the user interface and even has a few inaccuracies. The real documentation comes in a series of eight tutorials that offer extensive illustrated tutorials. A few minor flaws with these, and you'll be building your own virtual worlds. User-created scenarios and layouts are available on the Auran website. *Trainz 2004* promises hours of absorbing fun for the patient virtual railroader. **Loyd Case**

The heart of the sim is the ability to create complex railroad layouts and scenarios.

Trainz lets you drive around in action galore.

Do hot-air balloons and roller coasters mix? Best to stay on the train and avoid the carnival.

Verdict ★★★½☆

Everything is improved in what's still the coolest railroad builder around, but oh boy, you better love trains.

PUBLISHER: **Whiptail Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Pixel Multimedia** GENRE: **Action / RPG** ESRB: **Everyone** REQUIRED: **Pentium II 266MHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 4MB videocard, 1.4GB hard disk space** RECOMMENDED: **None**

Blade and Sword

Committing seppuku on a PC near you.

Raise your hands if you remember *Throne of Darkness* from three years ago. Take away the team-based aspects (and the fun) and you wind up with this half-decent, but very flawed, stab at *Diablo—Blade and Sword*.

The setup seems promising enough, casting you as one of three different martial artists whacking all sorts of nefarious demons in ancient China. There's the balanced swordsman that's easiest to play, the lightning-quick female, and the big goon that'll bash anything in his path. The problem is that a lot seemed to get lost translation before this game reached our shores. The most absurd omission in this sort of straightforward hack-and-slash game is an utter lack of loot. At the risk of sounding capitalistic, if I'm saving the world from certain destruction, it'd sure be nice to get my hands on a new sword at some point. The only things you'll find over the course of this adventure is the occasional gem to beef up what you already have, and throwing weapons—items ranging from the cheap, but effective, rock to throwing knives.

Oooo, that's gotta smart!

Something's missing

Another staple of RPGs that we often take for granted—randomized maps—is missing here as well. As is any form of multiplayer, or a coherent story. The rough Chinese translation (and poor interface for that matter) make it difficult to even care. All we could pick up before descending into a hell of hacking and slashing was that there were a lot of wars 3,000 years ago and this evil wizard is up to no good opening rifts between our world, the beast world, and the demon realms. Considering all the things missing here, can we really call this an RPG?

At least there's decent variety in the critters to be tamed because I'd have gone nuts long before finishing this game. Forty some-odd creatures, each with some unique attacks, linger at the edge of the screen and occasionally swarm in all their pixilated glory pressing the assault.

Four years too late

Think I'm being overly harsh? Just take a look at the side of the box. This game was built to work on a Pentium II! Correct me if I'm wrong, but it's 2004. I can get over the dated graphics look (even maxed out at the ENOURMOUS 800x600 resolution, it looks shabby and stale compared to *Diablo II*), they could've at least gotten the animations working right. As it stands, the playable heroes are so stiff, they move around like someone wedged a polearm up their posteriors.

So, why even give the game two stars? There's more thought put into how you attack than we've seen in previous *Diablo* clones. You start by unlocking some very cool new abilities (jumps, kicks, thrusts, yatta, yatta, yatta) through a *Diablo II*-esque skill tree system. As you accrue these mad skills, you can string together 20 or so attacks and assign them to four custom combo slots. Pick "Combo 1" and all you need to do is hit the right click button. There you have it—an honest-to-God good idea that is well executed in this game. Took us long enough. It'll make you forget for a couple minutes what a steaming pile Blade and Sword really is. **Darren Gladstone**

Considering all the things missing here, can we really call this an RPG?

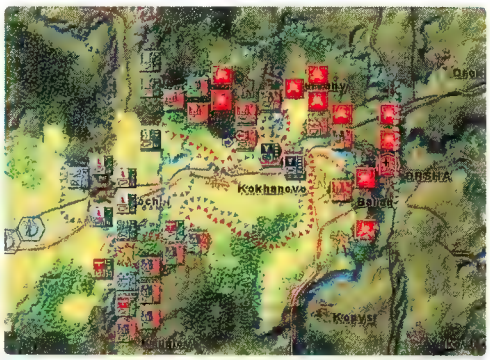
Verdict ★★☆☆☆

If this game came out four years ago, maybe. Today, no.

PUBLISHER: **Matrix Games** DEVELOPER: **SSG** GENRE: **War Game** ESRB RATING: **None** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 450, 128MB RAM, 27MB install**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 600, 256MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **2 via e-mail**

Across the Dnepr

Attack of the Russian steamroller



All those red hammers and sickles are part of a premature Russian counterattack.

K*orsun Pocket* gave war gamers a playable system with interesting battles and well-balanced scenarios. *Across the Dnepr*, its expansion pack, delivers on the first two but fails miserably at the last.

Dnepr depicts the Eastern Front three weeks into Operation Barbarossa. While a desperate retreat that trades men for time sounds like a great setting for a war game, it doesn't translate well into the *Korsun* system. Since *Korsun Pocket* doesn't model morale or command-and-control difficulties, the Soviet player has too much freedom of action with 100 divisions against the German player's 35, leading to very unbalanced games.

Historically, the dazed Soviets lost hundreds of thousands of men before stemming the German onslaught at the gates of Moscow. Most will find it extremely difficult to re-create this with *Dnepr*. If you play against the A.I. as the Soviets, you can easily start a march to Berlin by turn 5. Things only get a little better against human opponents, and even the best German players will have a tough time.

While $14.99 isn't a bad price for an expansion pack, *Dnepr* comes with only one scenario. Without smaller and more balanced scenarios to vary the experience, the value of this purchase is questionable. **Di Luo**

***Across the Dnper* exposes the weaknesses of *Korsun Pocket*, and it has only one (badly balanced) scenario.**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆
A very disappointing follow-up to a great war game.

Revisionist History
New info, old games

Lock On: Modern Air Combat

A good, realistic flight simulation is the hardest piece of entertainment software to program, which is why many flight-sim fans were willing to cut Eagle Dynamics some slack when it came to the rather buggy initial release of *Lock On: Modern Air Combat*. Almost two months later, the first patch is finally ready, but by Eagle Dynamics' own admission, more work clearly needs to be done.

The most common complaint about *LOMAC* was that it brings even the most powerful systems to their knees, with framerate problems reported across the board. Patch 1.01 not only doesn't really fix this, but actually makes framerates worse for many.

Although some reports of heavy framerate drops might be related to the patch resetting all the options upon installation, performance issues do not seem to have been part of this patch.

Many simulation issues have been addressed, however. First among these is the F-15 radar, which is now fully functional. While a host of other fixes to weapons and radar performance are very welcome, there are just as many reports of new problems being introduced. These can range from strange sound effects to screens that go blue and fire buttons that malfunction. Since the fixes are subtle or focused and the new problems are fairly wide ranging, it seems prudent to hold off on patching for now.

Eagle Dynamics has made it clear that 1.01 is an intermediary patch and that much more work needs to be done. A second patch to correct further problems (and address new problems introduced by the first patch) is already in the works. Every hardcore flight sim is something of a work in progress, and fans understand this. As long as Eagle Dynamics maintains its commitment to improving *LOMAC*, sim fans will stick with it. **Thomas L. McDonald**

PUBLISHER: **Atari** GENRE: **Strategy** DEVELOPER: **Firaxis** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium II 400, 128MB RAM, 2GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 256MB RAM, broadband Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: **LAN, Internet, e-mail (2-8 players)**

Civilization III: Conquests

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

Firaxis gives us a history lesson

A full-blown 6,000-year game of *Civilization* remains one of the sublime pleasures of PC gaming even after 13 years, a familiar experience for veteran conquerors. The ingrained strategies of each player dictate a certain pace for every game, even on vast, randomly generated maps. Scenarios can mix things up a little, but unless they're exceptionally well crafted, their rules and limitations can feel confining rather than challenging. Civilization III: Conquests aims to rectify that problem.

In *Conquests*, the goal shifts from building an empire to keeping or expanding one, as in the detailed Napoleonic scenario.

Around the world in 8,000 years

While there have been *Civilization* add-on discs before, none have been so effective at shaking things up. *Conquests*' nine gigantic scenarios, 15 new tribes, and other additions and improvements change the mix in ways both sweeping and subtle.

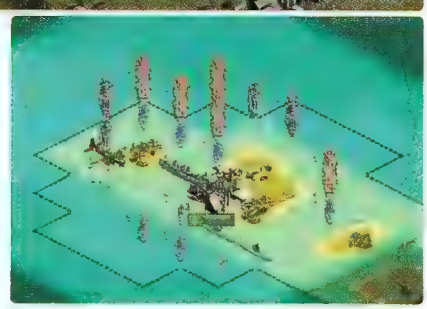
First, and most obvious, is simple craftsmanship. Each map focuses on a specific, well-defined period of history, and it's clear that a great deal of research went into making each map both accurate and unique. Many of the scenarios begin with the map fully revealed, civilizations already well developed, cities and armies in place, the battle lines drawn, and very specific victory conditions. In some games (like World War II), you begin with well-established and unchangeable diplomatic relations, and the challenge lies in working within these diplomatic limitations. In others, like Napoleonic Europe, relationships among states can be far more fluid, shifting the focus of the game to diplomacy.

In all cases, the different tribes have been carefully tweaked (and play balanced) for historical accuracy, with each civ given unique strengths and weaknesses, units, technology levels, governments, and even wonders. This is most evident in the Mesoamerican map, which charts the rise and fall of the Aztecs, Maya, and Inca. The most obvious addition is the ability to capture enemy units and ritually sacrifice them to gain culture points, but the Mesoamerican map also benefits from a number of smaller touches, such as treating jungles like grassland, allowing cities to be built on mountains, and adding a variety of resources specific to the region.

Advanced Civilization

Conquests brings all these additions and more to the regular game, too. Firaxis not only added a pair of high-difficulty levels, but also clearly improved the A.I. throughout the entire game.

And finally, the subject that has dogged Firaxis for two years: multiplayer. After the embarrassing failure of the *Play the World* add-on, Firaxis issued an exhaustive series of patches to fix multiplayer. The good news is not only that *Play the World* is included in the *Conquests* package, but also that it works. The bad news is that *Civilization* multiplayer, with its long play times and gamers who have a habit of dropping out when the tide turns against them, is just about the most unsatisfying multiplayer experience around.



Previous World War II *Civilization* scenarios lacked the depth and detail of the gigantic map included in *Conquests*.

But hey, you asked for it, and you got it. You also got an incredibly refined new version of *Civ III* and a spectacular set of new campaigns. After this, the only place left for Firaxis to go is *Civ IV*.

Thomas L. McDonald

Firaxis not only added a pair of high-difficulty levels, but also clearly improved the A.I.

Verdict ★★★★½

Nine excellent new historical scenarios are host to a wide-ranging series of improvements and additions to *Civ III*.

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Secret Level** GENRE: **Fantasy Fighting** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800, 128MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 1.4GB install, broadband Internet for multiplayer online** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.3GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2 players, Internet**

Magic The Gathering—Battlegrounds

Aimed squarely at an audience of no one

Fans of *Magic: The Gathering,* the card game, take note: This is not *Magic: The Gathering,* the card game. Cards can't be drawn or discarded (all of your spells are always available), this game takes place in an arena, and there are a whole host of rules applying to how creatures fight and react that are surely the result of this being, in fact, a fighting game and not a card game. Except that *Battlegrounds* isn't really a fighting game, insomuch as your character isn't doing the fighting. Instead, you control one of two duelists who cast spells that summon creatures that essentially fight one another. So, then: Card game fans, this is not a card game. Fighting game fans, this is not a fighting game. Who, then, will like *Magic: The Gathering—Battlegrounds*? I don't know, but I know it's not me.

Apparently, these two hit the same Frederick's of Hollywood sample sale.

How do I hate thee? Let me count the ways

For one, I don't like keyboard-controlled "fighting" games, and this one is particularly painful. Both hands are forced into a kind of crazed itsy-bitsy-spider routine as you attempt to move (WASD keys), shield (CTRL), and Attack (Space) with one hand, then open your spellbook (I), choose one of the three outer cards (Sorcery, Creature, Enchantment—J, K, or L), scroll through up to 10 spells (U, O), and choose a card (J, K, or L again). Repeat ad infinitum. I am convinced it would be easier to learn to play the piano, possibly while blindfolded.

Nor do I like games with subquests introduced with the warning, "This duelist will at first seem impossible to beat." If I want impossible, I'll call my mother. I'm not saying I want a game of checkers... although, at least in checkers, you can employ a variety of strategies to achieve your goal. *Battlegrounds'* easier quests are over in less than a minute; they're really just leveling you up by making you practice a new spell, so it's the equivalent of repeatedly delivering a one-two punch. The tougher quests demand a series of spells, but almost always require you to employ those spells via a specific strategy predetermined by the game. Cast one too many Defiant Elves and you'll run out of the mana you need for the Rushwood Elemental/Giant Growth combo you must cast in order to complete the quest. Of course, "this duelist will at first seem impossible to beat," mainly because she is constantly setting you on fire with Engulfing Flames, so your life will waste away many, many times before you cast exactly the right spells in exactly the right, perfectly timed order to knock that flame-casting bitch on her ass. Eight or nine unsuccessful attempts? I can live with that. Eighteen attempts with no luck? Check, please.

If I want impossible, I'll call my mother.

I think I learned this move in my self-defense class.

Do I like anything about *Battlegrounds*? Yes. I like the idea of a fighting strategy based on casting a combination of spells. What's not to like about casting Giant Growth on your Gorilla Chieftain, then enchanting him with Fervor to speed him up something fierce? I like giant, speeding gorillas, and more than once, I admit that this aspect of the game kept me engaged for upwards of an hour at a time. And if I'd ever managed to get someone to engage in some multiplayer online dueling with me (so far, challenges delivered: 6; resulting duels: 0), they'd see just how much I like giant, speeding gorillas. Until then...checkers, anyone? **Kristen Salvatore**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

A fighting game in which you don't really fight? No thanks.

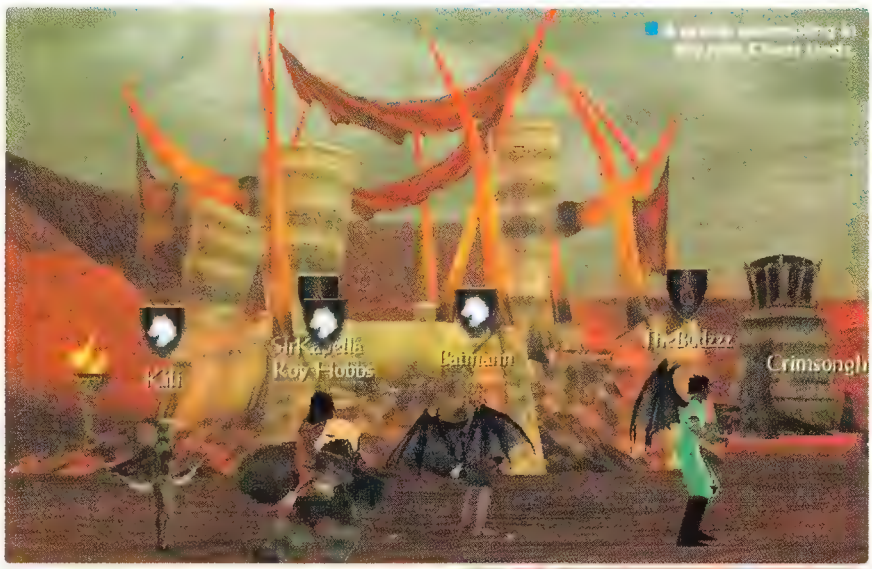
PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Wolfpack Studios** GENRE: **MMORPG** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM, 1.5GB install, 32MB videocard, Internet connection** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.2GHz, 256MB RAM, 128MB videocard, broadband Internet** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive**

Shadowbane: Rise of Chaos

Half a loaf is better than none

Gazelle, zebra, maybe a dash of Christian missionary—the hungry lion is easy to feed. So too are massively multiplayer game fans when it comes to expansions for their game of choice. Any new content is welcomed with open arms by hungry players. This eagerness explains how the *Shadowbane* expansion *Rise of Chaos* can elicit simultaneous feelings of pleasure and disappointment. We're grateful you tossed us a few crumbs, Ubisoft, but couldn't you have tossed more than a few?

Rise of Chaos is, overall, a run-of-the-mill experience. It offers new content, but not a lot of it, and doesn't make any significant changes or advances to the basic gameplay. It skimps when it should lavish—but it's still a must for hardcore *Shadowbane* players.



Thrills killed

What does *Rise of Chaos* deliver? The batlike Nephelim, a new playable race, can fly and is suited for the mage- and healing-based classes. There are two new character classes: sentinel, a platemail-wearing fighter with some magic abilities; and doomsayer, which relies on health and mana drains and offers a different playing experience from that of the other classes (My level 61 Nephelim doomsayer is a terror from above). And new discipline runes, Conjurer and Darksworn, confer the ability to summon creatures.

What else? The character level cap is raised from 60 to 75, you get an additional character slot, and you get a new, relatively small zone in which to adventure and fight higher-level monsters to progress to level 75. That's about it: no graphical improvements beyond weather effects, no real gameplay changes—nothing, really, to get excited about.

And yet I was excited to play *Rise of Chaos*. As a player who loved *Shadowbane* when it debuted and played it for months until burnout set in, it was a good excuse to jump back in, whereupon I discovered a game that had been improved since it was launched nearly a year ago. *Shadowbane* is more stable, and lag isn't the issue it once was (except during large sieges, when it can still be crippling).

The new *Chaos* island is a constant battleground as players fight to control the monster spawn areas.

Monster Island

Rise of Chaos does benefit from a new playable area, a barren and foreboding island inhabited by extra-tough and suitably oversized monsters. It's a constant battleground as players fight one another to control the monster spawn areas.

Wolfpack has also added a new, much-improved world map on two new servers. Players are bunched more closely together, and the result is a more active player-versus-player combat experience, which is the heart of *Shadowbane*.

Hmmm...I don't remember posing for a sculptor.

If you're still playing *Shadowbane*, getting the expansion will enhance your gameplay experience—that's an easy call. If you passed on *Shadowbane* or played it and quit, there's not much in the expansion to change your mind. No one will ever accuse *Rise of Chaos* of being too ambitious, and that's too bad. **Mark Asher**

Verdict ★★½☆☆

Just barely enough to satisfy true *Shadowbane* junkies.

PUBLISHER: **Novalogic** DEVELOPER: **Novalogic/Ritual Entertainment** GENRE: **Shooter** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 733, 256MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 750MB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.4Ghz, 64MB videocard.** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet (2-32 players), LAN (2-16 players), or IP LAN Dedicated Server (2-50 players)**

Black Hawk Down: Team Sabre

Once again, it's better than it should be

As a diehard military realist, I've finally accepted how unrealistic Novalogic's *Delta Force* modern combat games can be. This is no doubt abetted by how fun they are to play. Just follow my lead: Think of the *Black Hawk Down* franchise as a shooter and not a tactical simulation, and you'll be good to go.

A tale of two hotspots

Team Sabre moves from the streets of Mogadishu into the jungles of Colombia and the oil fields of Iran, where it is tasked with eradicating drug smugglers and anti-western terrorists. As with the original *BHD, Team Sabre* offers wall-to-wall combat in 11 new missions, or players can scrap the campaign and try their luck with a handful of quick action operations or original *Black Hawk Down* levels. It really doesn't matter, because all missions follow the same direct action script, and whether you're rescuing hostages from rabid terrorists on an offshore oil platform, snatching important documents from an underground drug smuggling operation, rescuing downed Blackhawk crewmen, or raiding cartel airstrips, the action is the same: Kill a flood of goons wielding AK-47s. Is this fun? Do ducks go "quack"?

The A.I. remains as wanting as before, and many of the scripted single-player objectives have about as much excitement as an *Eight is Enough* rerun. Thankfully, combat action saves the game and is fast and fluid throughout, with moments of real intensity. In one mission, my team and I finished destroying a drug lord's operational center in a remote Colombian village. As we secured the perimeter and awaited extraction, the drug lord hit back hard. The battle raged as mercenary smugglers hit our exfiltration site from all directions. I spent the next several minutes perched high in a tower manning a .50-cal., gunning down wave after wave of mercenaries assaulting our position. And even though I didn't need to worry about overheating the overworked machine gun, the intensity of combat breathed a bit of realism into the moment.

Along with the standard arsenal of *Black Hawk Down* weapons, *Team Sabre* offers

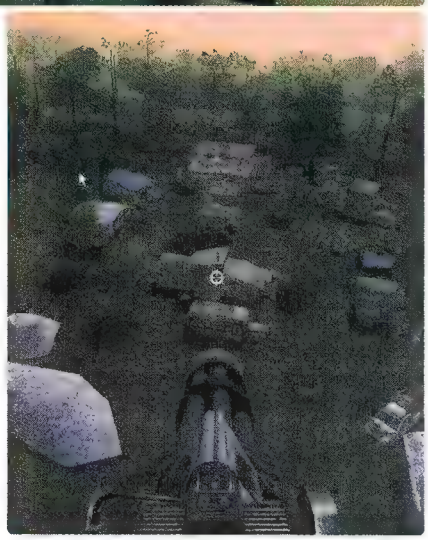
Is this fun? Do ducks go "quack"?

the obligatory new stuff. The weapon additions are notable with the superstable and powerful G3A3 rifle, the ultra zippy G36E rifle, and the high-capacity (and unbalanced for multiplayer) PSG-1 sniper rifle. There are three new vehicles loaded for bear: The MH-53M Pave Low SpecOps Helicopter, the VBL Light Armored Reconnaissance Vehicle, and the Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat (RHIB) have been added along with mounted heavy guns for variety.

Revisiting Somalia

Team Sabre beefs up a fantastic multiplayer original with five new maps, each with Novalogic's signature wide-open areas. Though terrain foliage remains sparse, many of the chokepoints, landmarks, narrow streets, and Progressive Spawn Point placements have been meticulously laid out, allowing for some hotly contested matches, especially during the team deathmatch and king of the hill-type games. The MH-53 helicopter and RHIB along with the three new weapons are available on selected maps.

With an abundance of combat action and multiplayer goodies from start to finish, *Team Sabre* is definitely a keeper for those original *Black Hawk Down* owners still squatting on the Novaworld servers, or players looking for another military-oriented action fix. **Raphael Liberatore**



The bigger the gun, the harder they fall.

Verdict ★★★★☆

Bad A.I. and no realism, but who cares? The nonstop rat-a-tat-tat of automatic weapons in hostile environments gives *Team Sabre* its charm.

PUBLISHER: **Empire Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Deep Red** GENRE: **Sin-Building Sim** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium II 600, 192MB RAM, 500MB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 800, 256MB RAM, 32MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Vegas Tycoon

Puts the sin in your sim

Bugsy Siegel drove out to the Nevada desert and saw the opportunity to make millions. Of course, six months after he opened the Flamingo hotel, his "associates" found his business acumen lacking and shot him dead. Such a fate is unlikely to befall you in *Vegas Tycoon.* Here, you're a member of the new guard of developers who exchanged baseball bats and brass knuckles for spreadsheets and market analysis as Vegas' predominant business tools. As such, while you'll sell your share of sin in *Vegas Tycoon,* you'll spend just as much time installing family-friendly attractions such as roller coasters and theme rides.

Campaign mode presents a set of tasks for you to complete before your computer-controlled opponents do. For each scenario, you design a complex that caters to the needs of a predetermined clientele, building appropriate entertainment options and controlling prices to keep a steady stream of customers entering your venues.

Feeling lazy? Select one of the computer-generated interiors for your casino.

You can choose whether your property looks like Disneyland or Times Square circa 1975.

Sandbox mode provides open-ended play—rather than having to cater to a predetermined group, you create an empire that will attract the customers you want.

The wages of sin is a new roller coaster

In both modes, you can build everything from aquariums to wedding chapels to adult clubs, allowing you to make something that looks like Disneyland or something that looks like Times Square circa 1975. However, you can only design the interiors of the casinos themselves. You'll choose what types of table games and slot machines to install, what the betting limits will be, and how big of a house edge your games will have. What you install in your casino will determine whether you attract high rollers or a busload of blue-haired grandmas. But choose wisely, because once you place something down, it can't be moved. Want to add another money-making blackjack table but you're short on space? Forget about moving that trash can, it's there to stay.

While the over-the-top architecture of your buildings mirrors the look of modern-day Vegas, for gameplay purposes, some casino operations lack realism. For instance, mechanics are constantly fixing broken blackjack tables, slot machine limits seem unnaturally high, and the house can set an advantage for itself in poker games.

No, Britney! Noooooo!

Building your empire is relatively easy, but keeping it running is a bigger challenge. Cleaners, mechanics, and electricians regularly need to be sent to work on what you have built, and everything that breaks down must be individually selected for repair, so if you have a bank of 60 slot machines, you must individually select each one that needs to be fixed. A hotkey option would have made this sometimes arduous task somewhat simpler. In addition to daily wear and tear, a host of disasters awaits your creation. In this case, God shows his displeasure by blasting your temples of sin with an Old Testament mix of dust storms, rats, and lightning strikes.

The game's highly detailed environments may lead you to spend hours just wandering around your creation at street level, but with so many buildings at your disposal, you'll also put in plenty of time trying to move from small-time player to entertainment kingpin. The makers of the well-received *Monopoly Tycoon* have created an entertaining sim—*Vegas Tycoon* gets the look and feel of Sin City just right. **Tom Edwards**

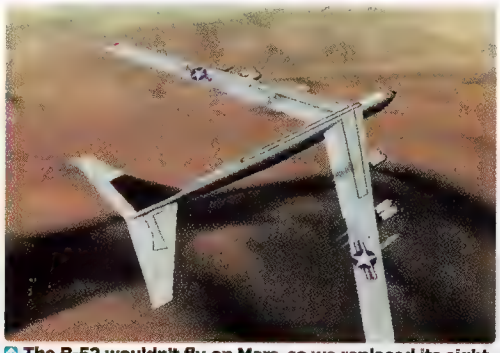
Verdict ★★★½☆

An amusing sim from the makers of *Monopoly Tycoon.*

PUBLISHER: **Laminar Research** DEVELOPER: **Laminar Research** GENRE: **Flight Sim** ESRB RATING: **Not rated** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 600 (or Power Mac 400), 384MB RAM, 4GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 1GHz or Power Mac G3** MULTIPLAYER: **LAN, Internet (2-10 players)**

X-Plane 7.40

More fun than a CAD program



The B-52 wouldn't fly on Mars, so we replaced its eight jets with rockets and gave the wings and tail a big stretch.

If *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004* is the sim equivalent of a plush, leather-seat-equipped business jet, then *X-Plane* is a sleek, fiberglass homebuilt craft with a spray-can paint job and an illicitly obtained JATO rocket hidden in the tail. It's not as pretty or as comfortable a ride, but it's a fun flight for simulation pilots who want to get under the hood and tinker with high-performance aircraft.

X-Plane has been around since the mid-1990s, starting life as a $200 simulation aimed mainly at real-life aircraft designers interested in seeing how their ideas would fly. The price has dropped to a more reasonable $50, expanding the audience, but it's still wannabe aeronautical engineers and test pilots who'll find the most to like here.

Given its pedigree, it's no surprise that *X-Plane*'s flight models are convincingly realistic. The sim includes 50 aircraft, from the F-105 Thunderchief jet fighter to the more pedestrian Cessna 172 to the Mach 5 X-15. Fly the space shuttle on final approach or simulate a full reentry from orbit. Even expert pilots will find flying over the optional Mars scenery challenging, given the light gravity and thin atmosphere.

X-Plane includes all the tools you need to create your own aircraft and scenery areas—all except good documentation. The incomplete, sketchy HTML documentation is a year out of date, and it omits much-needed info on flying unique vehicles. Still, planes are surprisingly easy to create, since *X-Plane* determines their handling characteristics by doing calculations on the plane's shape, which saves you from doing the math. Define the outline in the Plane Maker *CAD* program, set the engine, weight, and other characteristics, and you're ready to take your plane for a test flight.

Unlike *FS2004,* aircraft here can have more than four engines, with a mixture of jet and piston power plants (for example, a freeware B-36 with six props and four jets is available). Unique scenarios include glider tows, air-to-air refueling, and airdrops from a B-52. You can load weapons on your planes, but there's no combat and very little A.I. traffic.

This is a sim for flying, not sightseeing. Terrain around the world is reasonably detailed, but there are only generic buildings, and even some of those are misplaced—downtown Seattle consists of skyscrapers jutting out of the water. Aircraft detail is also generations behind Microsoft's product.

X-Plane is updated with new features and bug fixes (and, occasionally, new quirks) on an almost monthly basis; updates through version 7.99 will be free to registered users. As a simulation of the full flying experience, this one-man project can't compete with the refinement of *FS2004,* but for the tinkerer or virtual pilot looking for unique flying experiences, it's a fun toolkit to dive into. **Denny Atkin**

Verdict ★★★☆☆

More appealing to would-be aircraft designers than to PC pilots.

PUBLISHER: **Encore** DEVELOPER: **Lost Toys** GENRE: **Action** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM, 750MB install, 32MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **256MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet (2 players)**

Battle Engine Aquila

Mech-lite action but still fun

Battle Engine Aquila isn't hardcore like the MechWarrior series, but its simplicity doesn't compromise it, either. Yeah, it doesn't have the options and loadout screens you think it should have, but your preloaded mechs have their own subtleties, which affect weapon payload, armor strength, or the efficiency of shooting planes versus tanks.

You take on the role of a pilot of a prototype Battle Engine, a mech with flight capabilities—in a world where the polar ice caps have melted and land is fought over by factions. Fighting on your planet is the game's focus, and it's done very well. Missions play out in real time, and flying from one end of an island to another forces you to be aware of the way bases spring up around you. Ignore even a seemingly small part of the attack and you may not complete your objectives.

Yeah, the 25 missions are fairly linear, typical of a title originally designed for consoles, but when and what you choose to attack ensure that replaying missions doesn't get too repetitive. Yeah, the cutscenes are cut-rate and fuzzy, but the game is gorgeous and stunningly fluid. Yeah, when there are a hundred soldiers and vehicles flying and driving around you, Battle Engine Aquila is fun, but it doesn't do anything groundbreaking—which probably explains why it was a commercial dud on consoles. **Jason Babler**

Ignore even a seemingly small part of the attack and you may not complete your objectives.

Verdict ★★★½☆

Fun and varied gameplay, but probably not enough for the hardcore.

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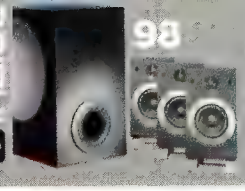
*ATI's RADEON 9800XT 256MB DDR compared with Nvidia Geforce FX5900Ultra 256MB DDR, tested on the following system: P4-3.2GHz CPU, Intel i875P chipset, Windows XP Professional with ATI driver v.7.93 and NVIDIA driver v45.23. Resolutions: 1600x1200 4XAA.

The iXPS offers excellent CPU performance and acceptable graphics performance.

MANUFACTURER: **Dell** URL: **www.dell.com** PRICE: **$3,329**

Heavyweight Co

Dell enters the gaming notebook arena with the beefy Inspiron XPS

Inside

98
Eardrums are overrated!
Hearing be damned. Creative's got seven channels of audio goodness.

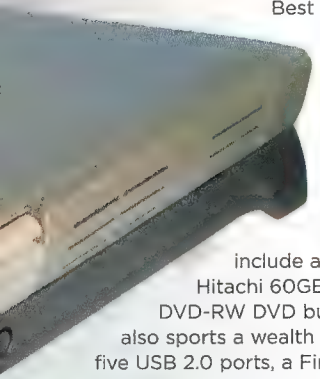
104
Vegas, baby!
Wil attends CES, and all he has to show for it is a new camera phone and a late mortgage payment.

110
Media Center PCs
Are we ready to have the PC act as the brains of our home theater?

Having scored a minor hit with its XPS desktop gaming system, Dell is trying to do the same with the new Inspiron XPS (iXPS) gaming notebook. Offering massive CPU horsepower (including a pricey 3.4GHz Pentium 4 Extreme Edition option) and ATI's latest mobile graphics engine, the iXPS is aimed squarely at the hearts and minds of gamers who desire portability.

The iXPS uses a desktop chipset, the 865PE, and ships with desktop Pentium 4 processors. The unit we tested offered a 3.4GHz Pentium 4 CPU with 512KB of L2 cache ("Northwood") and 1GB of DDR400 memory. Originally, the system was slated to ship with the newer "Prescott" CPU with 1MB of L2 cache, but Dell has postponed that option for the time being.

The iXPS offers some interesting features beyond just a fast CPU and GPU. The system has an integrated "subwoofer," which extends the bass response down to below 100Hz. While "subwoofer" is a misnomer, it definitely improves the overall punch of the built-in audio. You can also buy the system with a basic install option—only the operating system and drivers are installed, while optional software is shipped on CDs. This eliminates the tray clutter that often sucks CPU cycles and adds to stability problems.



Best of all, Dell will offer graphics hardware upgrades to users at a reasonable cost and will even send a tech to your house to take care of installation.

Storage options include a speedy 7200 rpm Hitachi 60GB hard drive and DVD-RW DVD burner. The system also sports a wealth of ports, including five USB 2.0 ports, a FireWire port, Gigabit Ethernet, and a Wi-Fi connection. There's also the usual VGA port for an external monitor and a welcome DVI output port for additional digital flat panels.

The iXPS performance is certainly beyond reproach for a notebook PC. Running at 1024x768x32 without antialiasing, the system achieved a GameGauge 3.5 score of slightly over 46. *UT2003* framerates in excess of 60fps were par for the course, and even *Halo* approached 30fps using the pixel shader 2.0 option. During an extended *Halo* session, framerates were mostly good, but they occasionally dipped into slideshow range during periods of heavy weapons fire and explosion effects. Less-intensive games fared much better. *UT2003* was generally quite smooth, for example. We don't know how well the iXPS will handle titles such as *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3*, but you'll probably need to scale back the resolution due to the four-pipe architecture of the Mobility Radeon 9700.

If we could convince him to carry the iXPS on a few "business" trips, even Wil O'Neal would develop bicep muscles. Or a hernia. But definitely one of the two.

What's not to like?

The XPS includes some odd design choices, plus limitations inherent in mobile systems. For example, the Radeon Mobility 9700 is really just a souped-up Mobility 9600. It still has just four pixel pipelines, making the "9700" label rather misleading (the desktop 9700 had eight pixel pipes). The inclusion of a wicked-fast desktop CPU also has some trade-offs—fan noise was pretty noticeable during CPU-intensive benchmarks and gameplay.

However, the oddest choice is the 15.4-inch widescreen display. While the 1920x1200 resolution is startling, we would have preferred a bigger display in a so-called "desktop replacement" notebook. Having used 17-inch widescreen notebooks from other manufacturers, we like the larger real estate for gaming, even if the native resolution is a bit lower. The added weight is really not all that substantial in a system that already weighs in at more than 9 pounds (9 pounds, 5 ounces without the power brick; 10 pounds, 12 ounces with the massive power brick).

In the end, the iXPS is a good first effort for a gaming notebook. It offers excellent CPU performance and acceptable graphics performance, and we love the fact that Dell offers graphics-card upgrades. We'd like to see larger screens in future versions, and laptop graphics are still somewhat limited for high-end gaming. While the iXPS could use some refinements, companies such as Voodoo and Alienware better be looking over their shoulders. **Loyd Case**

Verdict ★★★★☆

Fast CPU and improved graphics, but it's heavy, it has only a modest display, and it's noisy.

ntender

MANUFACTURER: **Creative Labs** URL: **www.creative.com** PRICE: **$499.99**

We've Got You Surrounded

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

Seven channels of sweet-sounding thunder

We're beginning to see a pattern here. First, Creative releases a new soundcard with 7.1 channels. Then it releases a budget 7.1 speaker set before unleashing the big guns. The GigaWorks S750 is a 700-watt 7.1-speaker surround-sound system that provides enough fidelity and power to blow competitors out of the water.

Of the seven included satellite speakers, three sit up front, one goes on each side, and the remaining two perform discrete rear-surround duties in the back. All that's missing is a rear center channel, but as it stands, the seven satellites provide the smoothest 3D audio panning currently available for games and DVDs.

player often becomes completely surrounded, and the accurate 3D audio positioning from the combination of an Audigy 2 ZS and the GigaWorks 750 kept us from getting shot in the back.

The speakers are managed via a wired control pod or from the included wireless remote control. There's some distortion from the satellites, and the bass gets muddy when the speakers are cranked up to maximum volume, but this is a nonissue because only the clinically insane would listen to this system at full volume.

We also tested the speakers in a home-theater setup using Creative's DDTS-100 decoder (see sidebar), which was linked via a fiber-optic cable to a DVD player, and the results were spectacular. Movies with DTS-ES and Dolby Digital EX soundtracks, such as *Gladiator* and the extended edition of *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers,* sounded better with this setup than with any other consumer-electronics home-theater package we've heard in this price range, and there's enough volume on tap to fill even a large living room with theater-quality sound.

The accurate 3D audio positioning from the combination of an Audigy 2 ZS and the GigaWorks 750 kept us from getting shot in the back more than once.

Hear ye, hear ye

You don't need a 7.1-channel soundcard to take advantage of this system, thanks to its 5.1-7.1 and 6.1-7.1 upmixing abilities, but 7.1 channels provide a better gaming experience. This is especially true with titles that use EAX Advanced HD to good effect, such as *Call of Duty* and *Splinter Cell*. The former is particularly outstanding, since the crystal-clear 7.1 surround-sound field gives the game an entirely new level of sonic depth. During the Pegasus Bridge mission, the DVDs played on a PC sounded almost as good, but none of the DVD playback software we tested could supply a properly upmixed 7.1-channel sound stream.

We used the speaker's upmixing to compensate, but the resulting surround-sound field wasn't as rich as when the DDTS-100 performs the upmixing duties. If you have the space and enough leeway in your budget to buy them, the Gigaworks 750 represents the best computer speaker system you can get right now. **Tracy Baker**

Verdict ★★★★½

The best surround-sound speakers for gaming that a helluva lot of money can buy.

Receiver Replacement

Finally, a bona fide home theater with GigaWorks speakers

Creative Labs' Decoder DDTS-100 is the final piece of the puzzle that enables you to turn any GigaWorks speakers into a complete PC and console solution. Wonder Twin powers finally activated, the decoder plus any set of GigaWorks speakers equals a replacement for any standard receiver and speaker setup.

Essentially a signal decoder, the DDTS-100 (which sports one coaxial and three optical digital inputs, as well as three standard stereo inputs) can easily handle whatever you throw at it. We hooked it up to a PC using the color-coded analog connectors and to an Xbox and a DVD player using the optical digital inputs—and then we enjoyed dumping our outdated (circa 2001) receiver.

The DDTS-100 supports Dolby Digital EX, Dolby Digital DTS-ES, and Dolby Pro Logic II formats, and it comes with a wireless remote control. **Johnny Liu**

PRICE: **$149.99** VERDICT ★★★★½

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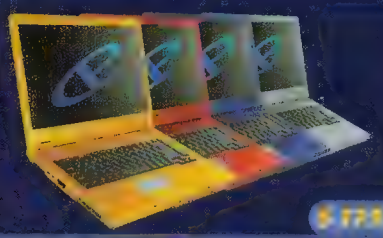

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EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

Radiant Radeon

With a ton of games and software, it's a power user's dream

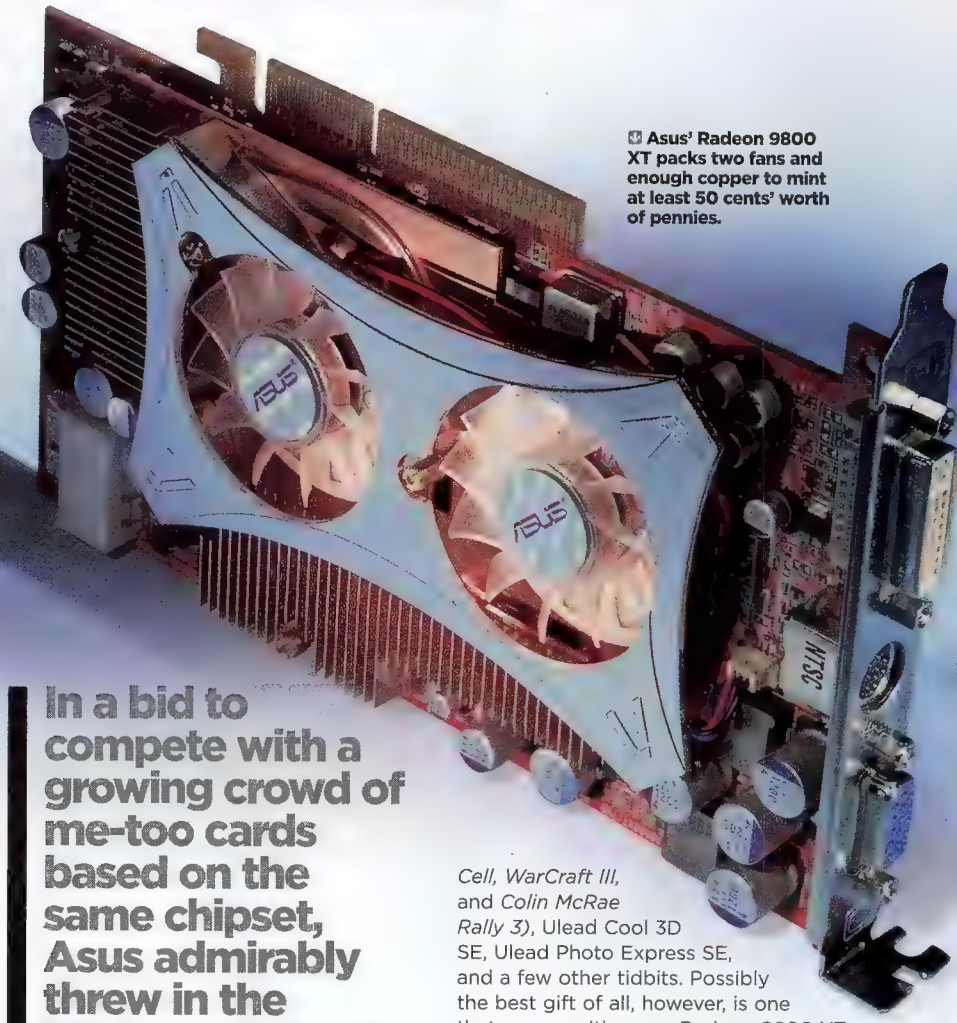
Benchmarks don't tell the whole story about graphics hardware. In fact, with so many over-the-top high-end graphics-card solutions from Nvidia and ATI clogging the market, benchmarks barely tell half the story. Throw in the fact that the top two graphics-card companies keep besting themselves (as well as each other) every six months or so, and things get even more complicated. And in the case of Asus' Radeon 9800 XT, benchmarks tell even less.

That said, let's get the benchmark part of the story out of the way. This beast performed nearly identically to ATI's own Radeon 9800 XT—which is to say that depending on whom you talk to, it may be the fastest thing out there. Any performance delta between the two cards was so negligible that the difference was probably in the noise. It quickly runs the most demanding games at high resolution and with goodies such as antialiasing (AA) and anisotropic filtering (AF) cranked up. In fact, we tested most of our games with 4x AA and 8X AF turned on when possible. (*Halo* disables AA and AF, so we turned these features off while playing it.) *Call of Duty, Tron 2.0, Max Payne 2*, and the notorious system hog *Halo* ran as smoothly as fresh creamery butter, even on an older Athlon 2100+–based system with 256MB of PC2100 memory. And for those with a current Pentium 4 3.2GHz or an Athlon 64, forget about it; combined with a 9800 XT, you're so armed that you're ready for games a year or more away.

At its native settings, the card's core chipset runs at 412MHz, and its 256MB of DDR memory runs at 365MHz (730MHz effectively). But it's not this Asus card's power that steals the show—it's the extras. In a bid to compete with a growing crowd of me-too cards based on the same chipset, Asus admirably threw in the kitchen sink and the rest of the plumbing, too. The card itself is fitted with a dual-fan cooler that weighs about 10 pounds, covers the RAM, and is held on with spring-loaded clips. Yes, you can overclock this card, and the task is made easy by the Smart Doctor II applet, which dynamically monitors the card's heat output to keep you from frying it outright.

About that kitchen sink...

Asus also includes a VIVO breakout box that connects to the back of the card via a little DIN between the VGA and DVI ports (the latter of which includes a DVA-to-VGA adapter, making the card dual-monitor ready). The breakout box has composite and S-Video in-and-out ports, so the 9800 XT can import and export video to and from camcorders, VCRs, and other video gear. You can use the video hardware with CyberLink PowerDirector 2.55 ME, one of eight CDs bundled with the card. Also included are a pair of full games (*Battle Engine Aquila* and *Gunmetal*), a disc containing six shareware games (including *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell, WarCraft III,* and *Colin McRae Rally 3*), Ulead Cool 3D SE, Ulead Photo Express SE, and a few other tidbits. Possibly the best gift of all, however, is one that comes with every Radeon 9800 XT card: a coupon for a free copy of *Half-Life 2*, which every gamer who buys this card will want the instant it comes out.



Asus' Radeon 9800 XT packs two fans and enough copper to mint at least 50 cents' worth of pennies.

In a bid to compete with a growing crowd of me-too cards based on the same chipset, Asus admirably threw in the kitchen sink and the rest of the plumbing, too.

Scouring Pricewatch.com, we found ATI's Radeon 9800 XT at a better price than the Asus version. However, with the Asus bundle, you get a viable video editor, a pair of decent games, a better cooling solution, and everything that comes with the ATI card. Which card is best for you? It depends on your budget and your needs, but the Asus Radeon 9800 XT delivers serious power and much, much more. **Joel Durham Jr.**

Verdict ★★★★½

Incredible power with loads of features and bundled software—but it's gonna cost you.

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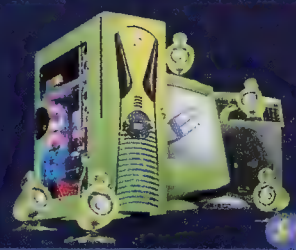

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MANUFACTURER: Logitech URL: www.logitech.com PRICE: $149.95

Keep Your Surround Sound

Logitech's Z-2200 proves that two speakers can get the job done

It's easy to understand exactly what a THX certification means when it comes from a set of cans like the Logitech Z-2200. A 2.1 speaker system with power spilling over, this aural titan sounds as good as anything found in a home theater.

Two hefty satellites weigh in at 4 1/4 inches wide, 7 inches high, and 6 inches deep—smaller than a toaster but not as small as a balled-up pair of socks. With a 3-inch 40-watt cone apiece, they bust out ample tones from the brashest midrange to delicate, supple highs. The sound is clean, accurate, and loud enough to drown out a nearby jackhammer.

Meanwhile, on the floor, the wood-encased subwoofer thumps in at 120 watts (the system's total RMS power is 200 watts). The 8-inch long-throw driver literally rattled my table. The bass is strong but not overpowering, and it's free of distortion. George Lucas was right to slap his stamp of approval on the Z-2200; few 2.1 speaker systems come close to this one's might. ⊠ **Joel Durham Jr.**

Verdict ★★★★½

Gobs of power, accurate sound, and butt-kicking bass.

MANUFACTURER: Logitech URL: www.logitech.com PRICE: $99.95

Cheap Thrills

Logitech's Z-3s sound great and look even better

Continuing on its roll of creating one high-quality speaker system after the next, Logitech unleashes a stately 2.1 speaker system that, while light on power, manages to ooze some seriously crystal-clear harmonic accuracy.

The satellites are about 8 inches tall and 3.5 inches wide and feature a transparent screen in front of a brushed aluminum facade, and sides decorated with a faux wood laminate. A handy wired remote offers volume control, a headphone jack, and a power button. The wooden subwoofer kicks out 23 watts through its 8-inch pressure driver and features its own volume control, inconveniently located in the rear of the speaker.

With a total RMS rating of 40 watts, the Z-3s won't shatter glass, but the sound these spunky speakers produce is to die for. The satellites bust out awesome midrange and treble, and the subwoofer lays down a solid foundation. You could definitely buy worse speakers for $100, but you couldn't do much better. And if it's style you're after, then the Z-3s are perfect. ⊠ **Joel Durham Jr.**

Verdict ★★★★☆

Stunning clarity and an awesome design are marred by an inconvenient subwoofer volume knob.

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MANUFACTURER **Cyberpower** URL **www.cyberpowerpc.com** PRICE: **$2,599**

Cyberpower's P4 Alternative

The Gamer Infinity is a rock-solid machine that normal people can afford

Cyberpower's Gamer Infinity 9900 Extreme is similar in many ways to the company's AMD Athlon 64 FX-51 machine reviewed in January's Ultimate Gaming Machine (UGM), but with a few changes: a Pentium 4 EE processor, ATI's 256MB Radeon 9800 XT graphics card, and a price tag that's nearly $1,000 less.

I tested the Gamer Infinity with 4x antialiasing (AA) and 8x anisotropic filtering (AF) turned on, and while its numbers weren't the fastest I've seen, this machine gives you a ton of bang for your buck. It scored 2327 in 3DMark2003 at 1280x960, and 48, 60, 114, and 80 in *Comanche 4*, *Serious Sam: TSE*, *Dungeon Siege*, and *UT2003*, respectively, at 1280x960 with 4x AA and 8x AF turned on. In *Splinter Cell*, it reached 43fps at 1280x960 with 8x AA, and in *Halo* it hit 42fps with everything turned off. (*Halo* disables AA and AF, so there's no point in turning them on.)

The Gamer Infinity is a bit slower than many of the machines in the UGM, but of course, it's also more affordable. I had some technical issues when the machine arrived, but the company quickly remedied them. The Gamer Infinity ships with some excellent components: The 500-watt power supply has enough juice to power any peripherals you may want to install later, Intel's D875PBZ is a rock-solid board that's been around long enough that you know what you're getting, and the 18-inch Viewsonic LCD means you'll have a pretty slick-looking setup overall.

By the Numbers

MANUFACTURER/ MODEL	Cyberpower Gamer Infinity 9900 Extreme
PRICE	$2,599
OPERATING SYSTEM	Windows XP Professional Edition
CASE / POWER SUPPLY	X-Super Alien / 500W
PROCESSOR (CPU)	Intel 3.2GHz Pentium 4 Extreme Edition
MOTHERBOARD	Intel D875PBZ (i875 Chipset)
MEMORY	1GB Dual Channel DDR400 PC-3200
HARD DRIVE	2x SATA 120GB 7,200 rpm hard drive (Raid 0)
GRAPHICS PROCESSOR	256MB ATi Radeon 9800 XT
SOUNDCARD	SoundBlaster Audigy 2 ES
OPTICAL DRIVES	52x/24x/52x CD-RW, 4x DVD RW
MONITOR	Viewsonic VG800 18-inch LCD
KEYBOARD	Ideazon Zboard
MOUSE	Microsoft Wheel Mouse Optical 1.1A
SPEAKERS	Creative Labs Inspire T7700
SPEED (PERFORMANCE)	3.5
PRICE	5.0
STABILITY	3.0
SUPPORT	4.5
UPGRADEABILITY	5.0
SCORE	4.2

Replace the included Ideazon Zboard keyboard with a regular old MS keyboard and you'll be good to go with this machine for some time. ⊠ **William O'Neal**

Verdict ★★★★☆

Not the fastest machine around, but the price is so good, you won't care.

Will Power

His monthly spew of filth

Cool gadgets and off-duty strippers: Welcome to CES 2004!

The 2004 Consumer Electronics Show has come and gone, and surprisingly I'm in good enough shape to reflect upon the things I saw in my second home, Las Vegas. Every January, Bill Gates talks about how the PC will eventually be at the center of your "digital life," and yet it never seems to happen. From where I'm sitting, the question has always been, why would you have a PC as a part of your entertainment setup? This year, media center PCs from guys like Dell, HP, and Gateway have answered that question. Media center PCs all essentially do the same thing: They're MP3 jukeboxes, DVD players, and Internet devices, and they let you record television (TiVo-style) to a PC. While these machines typically aren't pushing the kind of horsepower we saw in our Ultimate Game Machine story, they're quite capable gaming PCs. That is, if you want to play PC games console-style on your couch.

Among other cool gadgets we saw this year: Creative's Portable Media Center (PMC), a $500 gizmo with a 20GB hard drive that lets users take up to 60 hours of video or 5,000 songs on the go. While Creative's execs are jazzed about the device's real purpose, we all know that PMC stands for Pornographic Media Center. In any case, it's a great way to view your personal video files.

And what would a trip to CES be without some really cool cell phones? This year's award goes to Sprint's Sanyo VM500. More than just a camera phone, the VM500 lets you record 15-second video files you can send to your buddies' Sprint PCS-enabled cell phones or e-mail addresses. Yes, this is as dangerous as it sounds.

And finally, I'd like to send a shout out to my girls Laura and Shelly. See you next year! ⊠ **William O'Neal**

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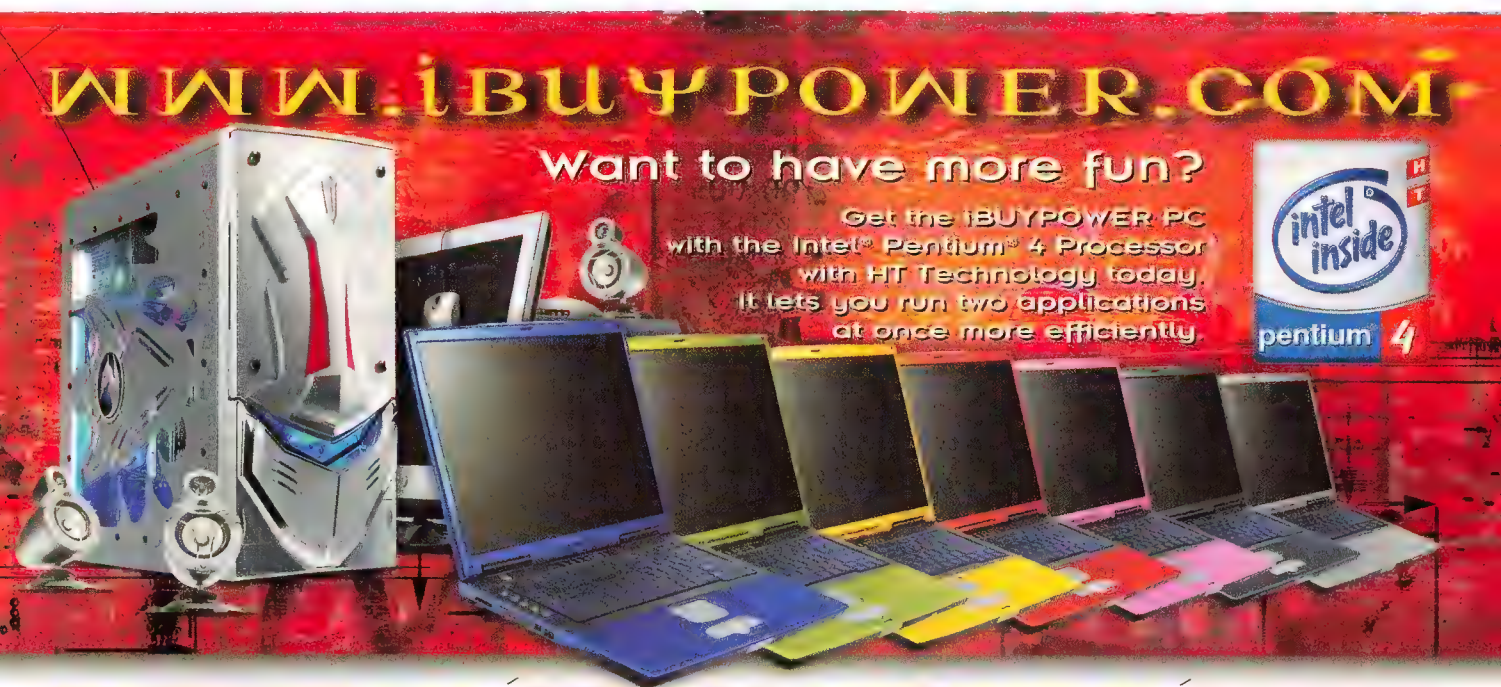
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Tech Medics

You've got questions, Wil's got a hangover

Beware of message boards

After reading your glowing review in the Ultimate Gaming Machine, I decided to buy a PC from Alienware. I posted my plans on some message boards and most responses said: "DO NOT BUY ALIENWARE PCS: BUY FROM iBUYPOWER OR ABS! ALIENWARE OVERCHARGES AND THEY AREN'T WORTH IT." Is this true? I know PCs from iBuypower, ABS, and a few others are cheaper, but are they better than Alienware?

Daniel

I'm wary of message boards. While that information is valuable, it's important to remember that the people who share their experiences are typically those with negative ones. Tons of people have had positive experiences with Alienware, but they probably don't feel compelled to go on message boards and discuss how happy they are—they're too busy having fun. As for your question, "Are they right?" I can't really say anything other than that I think Alienware makes good machines.

Which graphics card is better?

In the January 2004 issue, you say that the 5950 Ultra videocard is faster than the Radeon 9800 XT. In this analysis, have you taken into account Nvidia's poorly performing DirectX 9 advanced pixel shaders? I think you will find that as more games have DirectX 9 support and take advantage of these pixel shaders, the 9800 XT is a more compelling videocard.

Mark

Well, the 5950 tends to benchmark faster than the 9800 XT in currently available games, and that's why so many participants in the Ultimate Gaming Machine story submitted machines that use the 5950. I'm more of a 9800 XT adherent right now; as you know, I'm not crazy about raw speed alone, and I think the 9800 XT displays better image quality and stability than the 5950. That said, I'm also somewhat wary of damning the 5950's DirectX 9 support. The truth is, every game I have that's out right now works great on both the 5950 and the XT.

Buy this graphics card.

Everyone wants to know, "Which card should I buy?' So this month, I'm launching a preemptive strike: Buy ATI's 256MB Radeon 9800 XT. Happy?

Get your RAID on!

Wil, thanks for your thorough reviews in January's Ultimate Gaming Machine feature. In the machines with RAID, do the various motherboards have a RAID controller onboard, or is there an aftermarket controller card? If so, what model, Promise? Thanks in advance for your time.

Ronald

Yeah, both the Intel D875PBZ and Asus SK8N have onboard RAID support. As for aftermarket controller cards, it's been more than a year since I've reviewed a machine with an onboard controller card, but those I did review typically shipped with Promise FastTrack RAID controller cards.

Card stampers

Eighty zillion companies purchase GeForce FX chipsets from Nvidia. How am I supposed to know which ones do the best job of making it scream? You never mention individual board makers, just the main chipset! Chaintech, MSI, eVGA, BFG Technologies, Leadtech, ABIT, and a cast of thousands: Who's the clown, who's the hero?

Rick

That's a great question, Rick. Depending on which card you buy, your GeForce experience may vary widely. I'd stick with cards made by outfits you're comfortable with. All the companies you mentioned have reputations for using quality parts. I'd steer clear of companies you've never heard of, or companies whose prices for a particular card are well under those of comparable manufacturer's. If something seems too good to be true, like they say, it probably is.

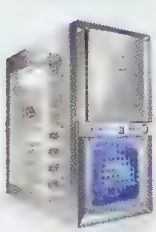
Which memory should I buy?

I just finished building my killer rig (2.8GHz, 80GB hard drive, AIW 9800 Pro, 512MB RAM, etc.). I followed your guidelines closely, except for RAM. I had heard that Mushkin is by far the best memory, but all the PC magazines, including *CGW*, recommend Kingston HyperX RAM. I looked at different forums and websites, and they all said that Mushkin is the best. I'm just wondering if you don't know about Mushkin, or if you know something I don't know.

Matt

We don't necessarily know anything that you don't know. The thing about Kingston is that it's fast enough, plenty stable, and widely available. I think that you, or anyone else for that matter, will be pleased with either Kingston or Mushkin memory.

ILLUSTRATION BY SUPERCORN



Some people are kinda nuts. Their malformed cerebrums (that's 'brains' for those of you who skipped Bio class) compel them to game wherever they can. Hey, we're kinda nuts ourselves. That's why our portable Super LANBOY case packs all kinds of gravity-defying goodies. Like a lightweight anodized aluminum body. A free carrying strap. Plus nine drive bays and two 120mm fans. So game wherever you want. Just use a safety net, OK? To learn how we can help you lift your game to a higher level, visit **www.antec-inc.com.**

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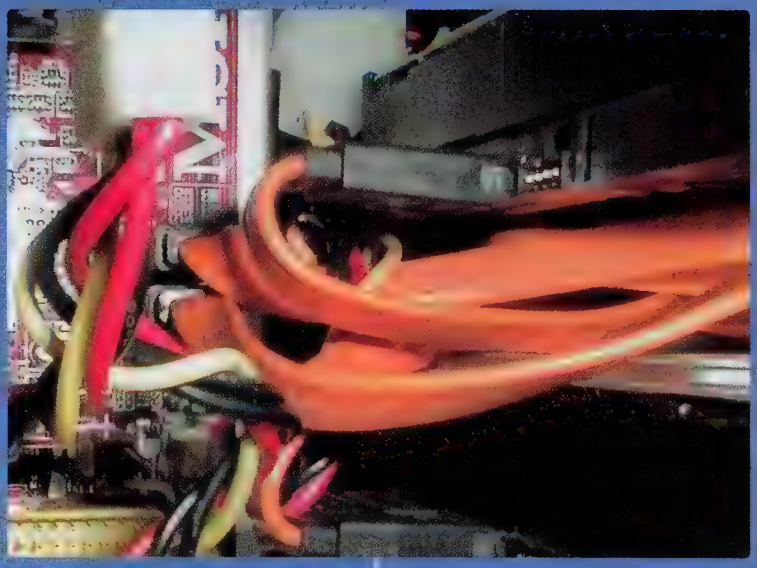
How to...

This month, we show you how to set up a SATA RAID alongside a standard EIDE hard drive

Joel Durham

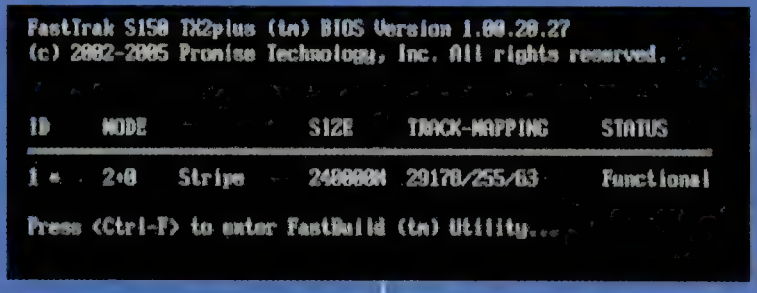
Recently, we've been reviewing PCs with a RAID-0 config for the OS and a separate hard drive for programs and data. One reader wrote in and demanded to know how to go about setting up something like this. Keeping the operating system separate from the data can increase a PC's performance while keeping personal data safe. The key, though, is to have the OS on a separate controller, not just a separate partition on the same drive. Using a system provided by Hypersonic, we demonstrate how to build a PC with the operating system on a SATA RAID-0 with a separate drive for programs and data. Be warned, though—you must back up all your pertinent data, as you'll be required to erase it during this process.



STEP #1

Acquire the necessary parts

You'll need two identical SATA hard drives for the OS partition (we're using two 80GB Seagate Barracuda drives). For the data partition, get an Ultra ATA/133 or ATA/100 drive. We're using a 120GB ATA/100 Seagate Barracuda. The motherboard in the system on which you'll implement this setup must support SATA RAID; otherwise, you'll need a SATA RAID expansion card. The MSI motherboard in the Hypersonic machine has an onboard SATA RAID controller. You'll need a diskette that contains the driver for your RAID controller. If the drivers came on a CD-ROM, look for a README file that describes how to create a driver diskette.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STEP #2

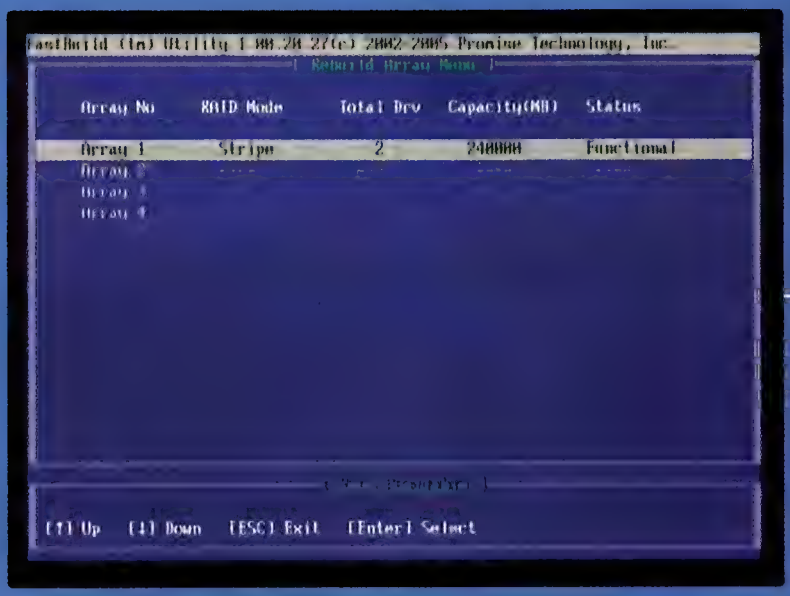
Connect the hardware

Connect the SATA drives to the power supply using the necessary adapters, then connect a data cable from each SATA drive to the motherboard or RAID card. Here's the cool thing about SATA: You don't have to worry about master/slave jumpers. Just hook up the drives and they'll take care of themselves. Then connect the EIDE hard drive to the primary EIDE port on the motherboard.

STEP #3

Power up the PC, enter the RAID setup program, and configure the RAID

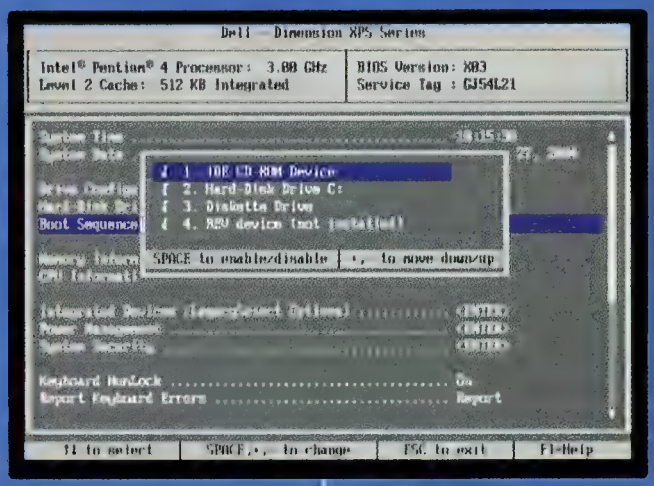
Turn the system on and watch for a prompt on the RAID BIOS screen to enter setup. In our case, we had to press Tab at the right time to enter the RAID setup program. You'll want to set up a RAID-0, which spans both drives and combines the entire capacity of both into a single "drive." Since the system can write to both drives simultaneously, a RAID-0 configuration increases hard-disk performance. Make sure the RAID setup program recognizes that there are two identical hard drives on the RAID controller. Next, find the option to create an array. Select RAID-0 (striping). Find the option that lets you select the drives to include in the array, and select both of the SATA drives.

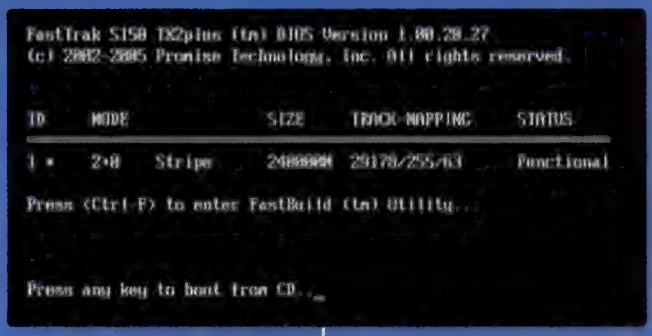


STEP #4

Set the stripe size and then create the array

There's an ongoing argument in the PC-performance world concerning stripe size, also known as block size. Basically, these terms refer to the size of the chunks that the RAID array will divide data into for storage on the array's drives. Smaller sizes increase the number of drives that the data will be written to—with a large array, this will increase performance. Larger sizes reduce the number of drives data will be written to. Since you're using only two drives, a stripe size of 32K or thereabouts will be fine. Next, find the option to tell the RAID setup program to create the array. The program will warn you that if you proceed, all data on the hard drives will be destroyed. Choose OK.





STEP #5

Tell the PC to boot the optical drive and RAID controller

In the RAID setup program, set the new array as the boot array. Then enter the computer's BIOS setup program and configure it to boot the optical drive from which you'll run the Windows installation. Configure the secondary boot device as the RAID controller. Finish installing Windows, then return to this screen and make the RAID controller your PC's primary boot device.

STEP #6

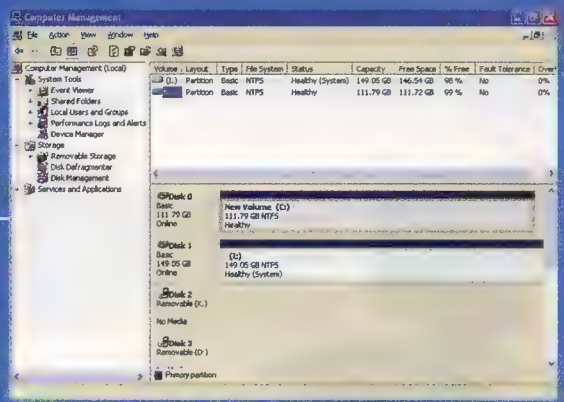
Install the OS

For this article, we're using Windows XP Pro. Place the CD in your optical drive and reboot the computer. You'll have to press a key to confirm that you wish to boot the CD. When prompted, press F6 to install a third-party RAID driver. Insert the floppy with the RAID drivers and press S when prompted. Follow the prompts to install the RAID driver. Note: Windows may call it a SCSI adapter. That's OK; Windows doesn't know about SATA. Install Windows normally, following the prompts as needed. When you're done, install the RAID drivers for Windows to get optimal performance. Install the drivers for your other hardware, including your motherboard, your soundcard, your graphics card, and so on.

STEP #7

Wake up the EIDE hard drive

Go into the control panel and run Administrative Tools/Computer Management. In the left pane, click on Disk Management. The right pane should show two fixed drives, along with removable drives. One of the hard drives should be listed as healthy—that's the RAID array. The EIDE drive will show up as unallocated. The RAID array might be set with a drive letter other than C, which is fine. Right-click on the unallocated drive and select New Partition. Follow the prompts to create a primary partition. If you want to make the EIDE drive your C drive, you might have to juggle drive letters with your various optical drives. To change a drive letter, just right-click on the drive, choose Change Drive Letter, and follow the prompts. When you're finished here, you're done. You've now got a screamin' hard-drive configuration.



Loyd's

Cracked Case

Loyd puts a PC in his home-theater rack, next to his HDTV. Is it just an overpriced console, or is Loyd crazy like a fox?

The Gateway FMC-901X is a high-end gaming rig masquerading as a DVD drive. You can store tons of music, videos, and games on its 200GB hard drive.

The big buzz at this year's Consumer Electronics Show in wonderful Las Vegas, Nevada, was "media center PCs" (or home-theater PCs). While many people are wondering if they want to have a PC in their living room, not to mention whether or not they "need" one there, I've been experimenting with home-theater PCs for several years now. Home-theater PCs allow you to watch DVD movies on high-resolution screens, scaling up the image to the full resolution of the display. Despite the cost of the PC, it's actually cheaper than a dedicated hardware scaler by companies like Faroudja. It also lets you do things like record television (TiVo-style), as well as serving as an MP3 jukebox.

The thing is, as technology has marched on, the PC as DVD player has become somewhat pointless. Inexpensive DVD players, with sophisticated progressive-scan output and even DVI output, that scale to HDTV resolutions do a better job today. Hardware like TiVo has co-opted the other HTPC application, offering an easy user interface for time-shifted TV viewing. When Microsoft shipped its Windows Media Center Edition version of Windows XP, it found that most users were really using it for displaying digital photos and videos of the family trip to Disney World. But even that application is being co-opted by lower-cost, networked "media adapters."

Or so I thought—until I took a look at the Gateway FMC-901X. (You can see the full review on Extremetech.com.) The Gateway unit resembles a high-end DVD player, albeit a bulky one, and integrates nicely into my home-theater rack. However, unlike other similar devices, the "X" version of the FMC-901 ships with a Radeon 9800 Pro and a 3.0GHz Pentium 4. All of a sudden, there's a killer gaming PC in my family room.

All of a sudden, there's a killer gaming rig in my family room.

But I have an Xbox there, so why would I want a PC, too? PC games are different, and they're usually better played in the near-field environment of a desktop monitor. But when I brought up *X2: The Threat* and added a Logitech wireless joystick, I was suddenly in another space. It's different from the console experience because I do sit forward more, but it's definitely different from sitting in front of a PC monitor.

Then there are hotseat games. We've been playing a fairly lightweight but fun title called *War! Age of Imperialism*. It's also fun to play small, browser-based games like Popcap's *Rocket Mania*. Gateway's wireless keyboard and gyroscopic mouse do take a little getting used to, but there's no reason you couldn't replace them with a more conventional setup, like Logitech's Bluetooth keyboard combo.

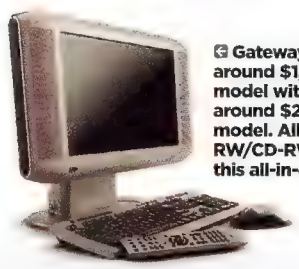
I also discovered that the latest version of Windows Media Player will rip my CD collection in WMA lossless format. While WMA lossless takes up more room than normal music compression, the FMC-901X has a 200GB hard drive. I dumped several hundred CDs into the system in a format that actually sounded good through my home-theater speakers. Having a mathematically lossless system that supports ID tags and all the other digital music goodies enables me to put all my CDs into a single networkable library.

Whether these hybrid devices will be successful is anyone's guess. It's my feeling that they need to offer something akin to the PC experience but in a living room setting. They also need to have substantial graphics and CPU horsepower. Some of the PC "consoles" announced at this year's CES seem to be designed for failure, since they really won't do anything well. But I'm sold on having a PC in the living room.

Loyd Case

Media Center PCs, Anyone?

There's a Media Center PC for every taste



Gateway's 610 media center PC starts at around $1,400 for a 2.4GHz Pentium 4 model with 256MB of RAM and tops out at around $2,000 for the 3GHz, 512MB-of-RAM model. All the components, like a DVD-RW/CD-RW combo drive, are integrated into this all-in-one option. (www.gateway.com)

HP's media center m300y starts at around $1,000 and goes up from there. More like the standard PC format, the m300y is upgradeable and flexible. (www.hp.com)

Check Out

Inside

The never-ending race to keep up with the Joneses.... You've got your sweet Radeon 9800 XT and your glorious Creative Gigaworks S750s, and then your awful neighbor comes over to boast about his Radeon 99000 XXXT and his Gigaworks U571 10.3 speakers. You can either fly into a jealous rage or call Mr. Jones a dirty, dirty liar.

A-List

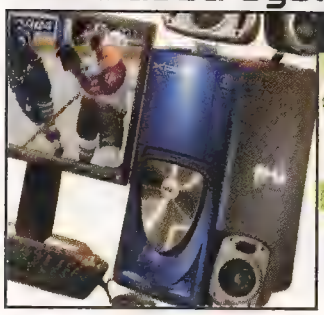
Our picks

A reminder to all of you: Prices can and will fluctuate. We get our prices from a variety of sources but consider them ballpark, not the be-all and end-all, carved-in-stone rates. That means you can't take this magazine to your nearby electronics store and demand that they adhere to the printed ink. Unless you want to get laughed at. If we held that kind of power at *CGW*, we'd send the economy swirling into a tailspin while you bought monitors for a dollar.

COMPUTERS

Sure, you can build your own computer for less money, but not everyone has the chutzpah. What is a total cakewalk to one might be downright unnerving to another.

Intel-based system



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK	
Dimension XPS $2,973 Dell Computers	Dell's advertising can be a bit odd. Case in point: the Dell Kidnapping Family. We say you should kidnap yourself a Dell Dimension XPS, a powerful, high-rated rig with solid support to back it up.
BUDGET PICK	
Area 51 Performance $1,700 Alienware	**The Alienware's plastic door hinges have been replaced with durable metal, and there's also a new shimmery crimson-orange paint offered. That's right, there are aliens of all colors—black, green, puce....**

AMD-based system

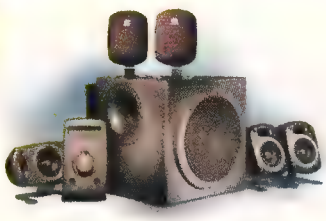
PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK	
PC 51 $5,000 VoodooPC	Behold, the winner of our Ultimate Gaming Machine, boasting the power of an overclocked Athlon 64 FX-51 and GeForce 5950. It costs about the same as a first-tier engagement ring. Get your priorities straight!
BUDGET PICK	
Assassin SE $1,629 Vicious PC	**Vicious PC may not be as notorious a name in PC computing as some other companies, but the Assassin PC is definitely killer, with a transparent case that turns heads, not to mention a pretty powerful system inside.**

LAN-boy rig

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Doll** $2,500 VoodooPC	The Voodoo Doll is cute enough to cuddle in bed and have tea parties with. Or on. Well, actually, that wouldn't be a good idea. You'd probably spill tea on the machine and cry for weeks.
BUDGET PICK **FragBox** $995 Falcon Northwest	**It's not the size of your computer, but the fact that you won't have permanent back injuries while hauling it up a flight of steps. You can have tea parties on top of the FragBox, too, but the skull logo may frighten your other guests.**

PERIPHERALS

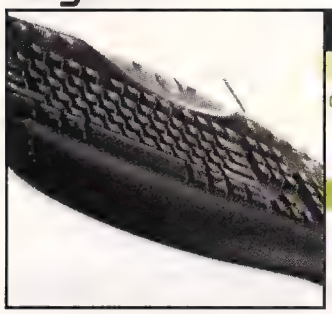
Even if you had the mightiest computer ever, it wouldn't be anything but a giant paperweight unless you had a keyboard. Or a USB jack in the back of your head.



Speakers

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Logitech Z-5300** $200 Logitech	There once was a mommy speaker and a daddy speaker with two baby speakers they "reared," as well as a pet subwoofer they kept on the ground. Don't forget Grandpa, the center of the home. And the speaker family of Z-5300 rocked the house!
MIDRANGE PICK **I-Trigue L3500 2.1 system** $100 Creative Labs	**Not everyone needs five channels of discrete audio. Creative's awesome 2.1 setup boasts excellent sound, as well as a wired remote that attaches directly to the company's MuVo line of USB MP3 players.**
BUDGET PICK **Logitech X-620** $80 Logitech	Another speaker family in this engrossing tale is a full family of six and one sub. While they are a rather frugal family, they still know how to make sweet noise, playing bar mitzvahs as The Amazing X-620s.

Keyboard



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
WIRED PICK **Elite Keyboard** $30 Logitech	Some things never change—much. Case in point: a keyboard. Next year's keyboards will still be arranged in QWERTY fashion. But the Logitech Elite's boatload of hotkeys does set it apart and make an excellent wired choice.
WIRELESS PICK **Wireless Desktop Elite Keyboard/Mouse** $80 Microsoft	**If you don't like QWERTY, there's the DVORAK standard. With a Microsoft Wireless Keyboard, you can repaint all those letters *and* avoid being held down by wires. Excellent for couch-potato gaming.**

Gamepad

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
OUR PICK **Dual Action USB** $20 Logitech	If you're playing sports games on a PC, then this is the gamepad to use. Many EA Sports games default to this controller, which is essentially a PC version of the PS2 DualShock controller.

A-LIST PERIPHERALS

Mouse

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
WIRED PICK **MX 500 Optical** $45 Logitech	Remember the days of opening up your mouse and pinching out the dust? Nowadays, turning over your mouse is like looking at a robot's genitals. Assuming their genitals are made of retina-searing light.
WIRELESS PICK **Wireless Intellimouse Explorer 2.0** $50 Microsoft	**Think about how nice it would be to hook up your PC to a big-screen television, snuggle into a comfy recliner with a table, and play your day away. Hence, the need for a good wireless mouse and keyboard.**

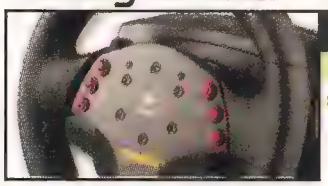
Headset

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
OUR PICK **PC150** $70 Sennheiser	When the rest of the world gets too loud and confusing, hide away in your own little realm. All the mean old troubles of the universe won't be able to find you when you're wearing Sennheisers.

Joystick

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
OUR PICK **Extreme 3D Pro** $35 Logitech	**Along with their flight-sim brethren, joysticks have dropped out of the public eye. While there are some wireless joysticks entering the market, the performance of the Extreme 3D Pro suggests you accept the cord to save some money.**

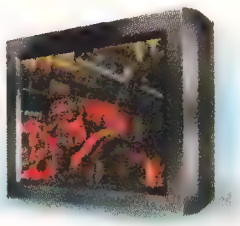
Racing wheel



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
OUR PICK **MOMO Racing** $100 Logitech	The entry-level MOMO wheel is an awesome peripheral. What's not to love about feeling like you're actually behind the wheel? It's just the kind of thing that'll get your motor in gear for some *Need for Speed Underground*.

DISPLAYS

Perhaps in the future, screens will holographically float in midair. You'll be able to grab and close giant windows with your hands, and you'll never have to worry about thumbprints.



CRT Monitor

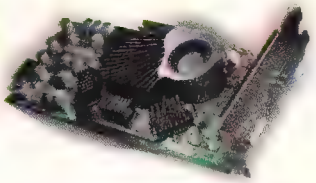
PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **21-inch MultiSync FE2111SB** $600 NEC	CRTs are still arguably the best choice for gaming when it comes to the ever-important price-to-value ratio. You can buy a huge screen and still have cash left over to buy a plastic fez-wearing monkey.
BUDGET PICK **19-inch E90fb** $260 ViewSonic	**Fourteen-inch monitors used to run the line as the awful first tier of monitors. Thanks to product growth, 17-inch monitors now straddle the entry line, with 19-inchers well within an affordable range.**

LCD Monitor

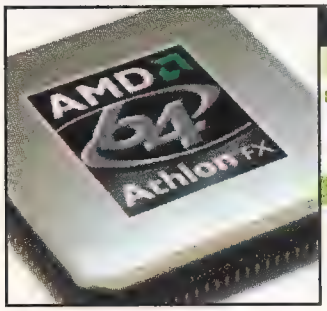
PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **UltraSharp 2001FP** $900 Dell	The UltraSharp is packaged with Dell's XPS system. It has a slick design and a response time of a quick 16 milliseconds, but CRTs still trump in refresh rate and price. On the other hand, LCDs are just plain wicked-cool.
BUDGET PICK **15-inch 152T** $500 Hercules	**In the world of LCDs, ghosts are the grim spectres that bring ruination to gaming. The Prophetview casts away those ghosts with its sharp image and smooth titanium metal casing.**

COMPONENTS

Making your own computer is the smart thing to do: You'll save yourself a huge wad of cash, and tech support will always be right there.

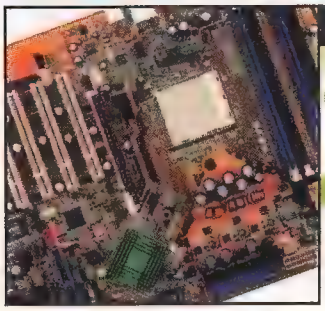


Processor



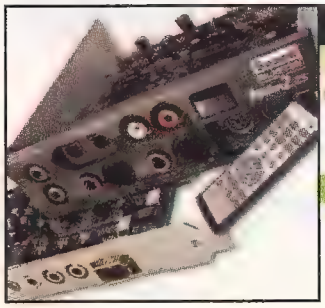
PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Athlon 64 FX-51** $733 AMD	Among gaming processors, the Athlon 64 FX-51 is on top of the heap. Even though the 64 bits aren't being exploited, 32-bit applications run almost as fast as Darren can talk. We said almost.
BUDGET PICK **Pentium 2.8GHz** $300 Intel	**While the 2.8GHz Pentium 4 chip is not as king of the road as an 800MHz frontside-bus 3.2GHz model, it is still one zippy little core. Plus, with an Intel mobo, you'll be ready for the eventual upgrade.**

Motherboard



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **SK8N nForce3** $225 Asus	Asus' SK8N nForce3 main board is the board of choice for the AMD Athlon 64 FX-51 processor. It has support for dual-channel DDR 400 memory, as well as SATA RAID. It also sports Nvidia's 6-channel audio.
BUDGET PICK **D875PBZ** $169 Intel	**Intel's D875PBZ isn't so much "low end" as it is flexible. Constructed around the i875P chipset, it has built-in SATA RAID support and makes a great backbone for an affordable Pentium 4 system.**

Soundcard



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Audigy 2 7.1 Platinum** $250 Creative Labs	Remember when it was outrageous to have rear speakers for computer gaming? Times are a-changin'—now, we've got the Creative Labs Audigy, a good match for the Gigaworks speaker set.
BUDGET PICK **Onboard audio** Free	**The most affordable option among soundcards? Pick out a quality motherboard with built-in sound. All of the drivers will come with the board, and the sound quality is fine for most ears.**

A-LIST COMPONENTS

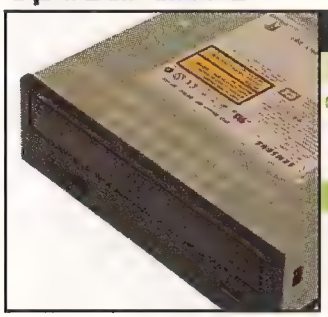
Videocard

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Radeon 9800 XT** $400 ATI Technologies	The Radeon XT was originally supposed to come packaged with *Half-Life 2*. Unfortunately, the game's release date slipped, but many of these cards are still being packaged with a coupon for its eventual release.
MIDRANGE PICK **GeForce FX 5600 Ultra** $250 Nvidia	**Between cards that will blow out your bankbook and those that will quickly fall behind lie the midrange pleasers, like our recommended GeForce FX 5600, which balances smooth polygon throughput with your paycheck.**
BUDGET PICK **GeForce FX 5200 Ultra** $150 Nvidia	Graphics cards will quickly burn a hole through the ol' bankbook, so staying a generation behind is the smart budgeting solution. The Nvidia GeForce FX 5200 has good rates for the money (but don't buy the cheaper, non-Ultra version).

Hard drive

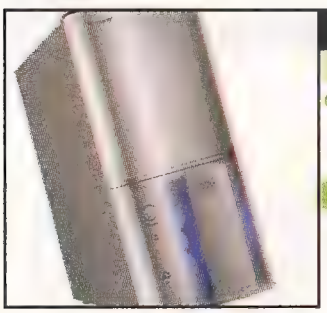
PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Cheetah 10K.6** $180 each Seagate Technology	The newest drives spin at a scorching-fast 10,000 rpm. Install two of these babies in a RAID configuration for your own road-runner-driven chariot. More than you'll ever need for gaming, but good for video editing.
BUDGET PICK **DiamondMax Plus 9 80GB** $80 Maxtor	**80GB drives at 7,200 rpm can easily be found for $1 a gig. Usually, they involve rebates with many specific instructions. We mailed in a rebate a day late and they wouldn't ante up our dough. Don't let the same thing happen to you.**

Optical drive



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **PlexCombo DVD/CD-RW drive** $60 Plextor	Even when you do something as sweet and generous as giving out five free games, people still gripe and complain. How about this? Buy a combo burner and try making a bazillion CDs for people on the street.
BUDGET PICK **DVD drive** $30 Lite On	**When the angel of DVDs comes around to your house, shouldn't you have a DVD drive on hand? For pity's sake, stop griping and go get one already! At $30, Lite On's drive is hardly a heavy hit on your wallet.**

Case

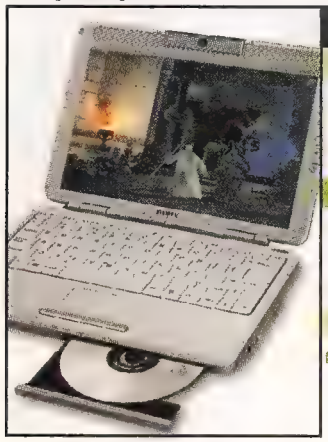


PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
TOWER PICK **TAC-T01-E1C** $150 Cooler Master	Cooler Master's TAC-T01 is big, heavy, and not necessarily cheap, but it's a great case for building that rig of your dreams. It's solid and shiny, and there's a metal monolith inset on the case's face. What is that thing for, anyway?
ALTERNATE FORM PICK **SN85G4** $300 Shuttle	**It's not the size of your computer that counts, and when you've got a slick little number like one of Shuttle's offerings, you're sure to get many oooohs and aaaahs. Get one with a big power supply—the girls love a big power supply.**

MOBILITY

Fresh, sweet air, the wind against your face...ah, spring! When a young man's fancy turns to fairer things. Or, if you're a nerd like all of us, to sexaaaaaay mobile computers.

Laptop



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **M675** $2,600 Gateway	With a 128MB ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10) graphics card and a 17-inch display, Gateway's M675 is doper than most desktop PCs. Plus, it can be difficult to put a desktop PC in your backpack.
BUDGET PICK **Dell Inspiron 5150** $2,000 Dell Computers	**Dell's Inspiron 5150 isn't the fastest gaming laptop around, but with its 64MB GeForce FX 5200 graphics card, you should be able to play any game that's out now. We played *Call of Duty* and *Max Payne 2* on it at 1024x768, and it worked like a charm.**
LIGHTWEIGHT PICK **Sony VAIO TR2A** $1,900 Sony	Now, this system might not be built with top-notch gaming in mind (it's got a 1GHz Centrino CPU under the hood), but, weighing in at 3.1 pounds, this little baby is great for older games.

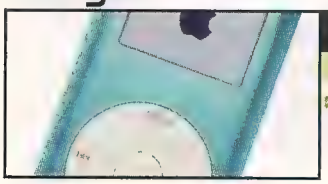
Phone

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
FLIP-PHONE PICK **SPH-A600** $350 Samsung	Of the current crop of camera phones, this one is the slickest, most game-friendly of the bunch (nice try, N-Gage!). Flip the screen around and there's even a GBA-like dock for better controlling the action. Now if only there were good games....
NON-FLIP-PHONE PICK **Nokia 3660** $200 Nokia	**Thanks to the new federal policy that allows you to keep your phone number, negotiating and pinning down a really good deal on a phone is much easier. For a normal-sized phone, this model works great.**

PDA

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
PALM OS PICK **Zodiac 2** $400 Tapwave	For the moment, you aren't gonna find another PDA with this kind of juice for the price that Tapwave is asking. With it, you can bust out some grinds in *Tony Hawk*, juggle your contact manager (yay!), listen to music, and watch *The Simpsons*.
POCKETPC OS PICK **Toshiba e805** $500 Toshiba	**This PDA sits at the top of Toshiba's food chain. It's built especially for the power-hungry PocketPC user, and its bells and whistles far surpass the 400MHz processor and 128MB of free RAM. What better way to run MAME and countless games?**

Gadget



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
OUR PICK **iPod Mini** $250 Apple	My iPod shrunk in the wash! iPod Mini has a smaller formfactor, 4GB capacity, multiple color options, and streamlined controls—the touchpad doubles as a multidirectional button. If only the price had shrunk a little more, too....

Rewind 100

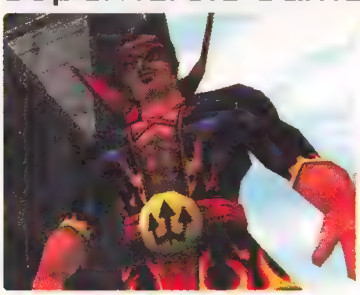
What should you play today? Names in red indicate Editor's Choice games

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Age of Mythology: The Titans Expansion	1/04	More bells, more whistles, same game	★★★½☆
Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic	11/03	A great strategy game that's worth purchasing for the random-map generator alone	★★★★½
American Conquest: Fight Back	1/04	Fight boredom and micromanagement by avoiding this lame stand-alone expansion	★★☆☆☆
America's Army: Special Forces v2.0	3/04	*Special Forces* is the tactical sim genre at its finest	★★★★½
AquaNox 2: Revelation	12/03	Like drowning in a sea of boredom	★☆☆☆☆
Armed & Dangerous	3/04	A straight-laced shooter with great cut-scenes	★★★☆☆
Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of World War II	12/03	The last bit of fuel injection for the aging *Battlefield* engine is worth the money	★★★★½
Beyond Good & Evil	3/04	Gorgeous, stylish, and wholly original, this action-adventure is a gem	★★★★½
Big Mutha Truckers	9/03	This big-rig game is better than it has any right to be	★★★☆☆
The Black Mirror	2/04	*The Black Mirror*'s gothic horror doesn't require much reflection	★★☆☆☆
Broken Sword 3	2/04	Dragon flamboyantly breaks out of the box, but drags it around a little too much	★★★★☆

Call of Duty	1/04	*Call of Duty* is so good and so much fun that you'll undoubtedly wish it was longer	★★★★½
Celebrity Deathmatch	2/04	Save your money by just throwing beer cans at the television	★☆☆☆☆
Chariots of War	11/03	As dry and inviting as the Arabian Desert	★★☆☆☆
Chaser	1/04	A good-looking shooter that's only fun for the first few hours	★★☆☆☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Chrome	2/04	A stunning sci-fi-themed shooter that makes *Halo* look hollow	★★★★☆
Cold Zero: No Mercy	12/03	*Cold Zero*'s repetitive, depthless play leaves you cold	★★☆☆☆
Combat Command 2: Danger Forward	11/03	A great scenario editor can't lift this average grand-tactical war game above *Korsun Pocket*	★★★☆☆
Commandos 3	1/04	May be the toughest game ever—and not in a good way	★★☆☆☆
Contract J.A.C.K.	2/04	No franchise shines forever—*J.A.C.K.* is the first blemish on the *NOLF* series	★★☆☆☆
Counter-Strike: Condition Zero	3/04	This game was great when it was free. For $40, it's just good	★★★½☆
Dark Age of Camelot: Trials of Atlantis	2/04	Good expansion for veteran players, but not much for new players	★★★½☆
Dark Fall: The Journal	11/03	The only thing missing from this eerie game's box is a change of underwear	★★★★☆
Desert Storm III	2/04	At times engaging, but not quite all it can be	★★½☆☆
Deus Ex 2: Invisible War	3/04	The sequel to *Deus Ex* is both dumbed down and smarted up	★★★☆☆
Disciples II: Guardians of the Light/Servants of the Dark	10/03	More cartoony goodness (and evil) at a bargain price	★★★½☆
Dominions II	2/04	The most gameplay of any 4X game available anywhere	★★★★½
Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna	2/04	Good stuff for fans of the original	★★★½☆
Empires: Dawn of the Modern Age	2/04	A solid entry into the burgeoning historical real-time strategy subgenre	★★★★☆

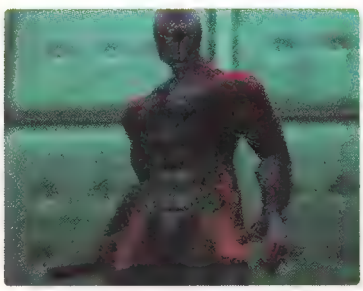
Superheroic Games



Freedom Force

★★★★★

You simply cannot talk about superhero games without including the original *Freedom Force*, or villains will travel forward in time to kick you soundly in the pants. And you don't want that.



Metal Gear Solid

★★★★½

Solid Snake might not have mutant healing powers or a cape, but he's one "super" spy. The higher-res port of the PS2's *Metal Gear Solid* was, like its namesake, "solid." *MGS* can easily be found on the cheap.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Endless Ages	10/03	Something new in the massively multiplayer field that's worth a look	★★★☆☆
Etherlords II	12/03	A better, cheaper 3D version of *Magic: The Gathering*	★★★½☆
Eve Online: The Second Genesis	9/03	We'd hate to see the first genesis of this MMO space game	★★☆☆☆
F/A-18 Operation Iraqi Freedom	11/03	Nothing really new here, but worth a look if you need a new sim for a slow system	★★½☆☆

F1 Challenge '99-'02	9/03	A must-buy for Formula One racing fans	★★★★½
FIFA 2004	2/04	It might be a rough console port, but it's still the best soccer game on any platform	★★★½☆
Final Fantasy XI	2/04	A rock-solid MMORPG from one of the most unlikely sources	★★★★☆
Freedom Fighters	1/04	Great teamplay tactics, but the PC version drew the short stick	★★★★☆
Ghost Master	11/03	This game is clever, stylish, and fun to watch, but it's a little too hard to control	★★★½☆

Gothic II	2/04	Better than the first, but still a little too wonky and foreign to be a classic	★★★★☆
Halo	11/03	Lost in translation	★★★½☆
Heaven & Hell	11/03	Witless, repetitive, and utterly devoid of interesting strategy elements	★☆☆☆☆
Hidden & Dangerous 2	2/04	A really good game hampered by the same pesky bugs and problematic A.I. as the original	★★★½☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Highway to the Reich	1/04	An excellent system gets better	★★★★☆
Homeworld 2	12/03	It's no *Cataclysm*—it's not even *Homeworld*	★★½☆☆
Hoyle's Majestic Chess	12/03	A valiant attempt at chess for dummies that doesn't quite teach dummies—but does provide some decent chess	★★★½☆
Jetfighter V	2/04	A rare combination of frustration and boredom	★★☆☆☆
Korsun Pocket	9/03	It sounds like a microwaveable snack, but it's the best hex-based war game ever	★★★★★
Knights of the Old Republic	2/04	A total masterpiece from BioWare. Easily the best RPG of the year, and possibly the best *Star Wars* game ever made	★★★★★
Legacy Online	10/03	A tedious exercise at best	★☆☆☆☆
Lionheart: Legacy of the Crusader	11/03	Unbalanced, tedious, buggy, and lacking in imagination—and those are its good points	★☆☆☆☆
Lock-On: Modern Air Combat	03/04	A tasty treat for starving jet-sim fans even without the dynamic campaign.	★★★½☆
Lords of EverQuest	03/04	A fairly decent attempt to capitalize on a tried and true (*WarCraft III*) formula.	★★★☆☆

LOTR: Return of the King	2/04	Check your brain at the door for this sword-swinging, spell-slinging good time	★★★★☆
Madden NFL 2004	11/03	Easily the best *Madden* game yet, but be prepared to buy a Logitech Dual Action controller	★★★★½
Massive Assault	1/04	Lemmings gone turn-based	
Max Payne 2	1/04	Improves upon nearly every facet but doesn't mess with the formula	★★★★½
Medal of Honor: Allied Assault—Breakthrough	12/03	Intense and usually satisfying, but barely good enough to justify the price	★★★☆☆
Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004	10/03	The most fun you can have in a plane without guns	★★★★½
Midnight Club II	10/03	What it lacks in multiplayer, it more than makes up for in fun	★★★½☆
Midnight Nowhere	2/04	Horrible horror with a zero for a hero	★☆☆☆☆

DVDs
Previous releases rewind

Aliens Quadrilogy
Nine whole discs packed full of chest-bursting, alien-slaying goodness! Unfortunately, David Fincher isn't wholly participative, but this is as definitive as it gets, at least until *Alien vs. Predator* comes out, spawning yet another collection containing deleted dance numbers.

Escape from New York
Our favorite badass, Snake Plissken, is back in the Big Apple, armed with a DVD chock full of goodness: a bank robbery sequence that was previously cut, documentaries, a proper commentary track, and a fresh and full 5.1 audio remix.

Firefly
Like a crushed bug, Joss Whedon's *Firefly* was too quickly canceled. Luckily, the stellar sci-fi western series has been resurrected in DVD form. There is also possibly a movie in the works.

The Hulk
★★★½☆
Hulk's game not bad! Action! Smashing! Ramp shading! All-around good port! Hulk happy! Hulk struggle to say more things because one-word exclamations make word count low. HULK SAD!

City of Heroes
N/A
The game isn't out yet, but the promise of combining the best of superheroics with the world of MMORPGs does whet the inner geek. To wit: Darren's personal creation, Headcase, a "heroine" named after his ex-girlfriend.

Graphic Novels
Some of our favorites

Blankets
The joy and loss of one's first love, eloquently told in this skilled and brutally honest autobiographical narrative. It's definitely worth a buy, even if you have to put up with the odd stares of other buyers questioning why you'd want to read something entitled *Blankets*.

Bone
If you haven't read *Bone*, you're missing out on an epic in the odd combination of Walt Kelly's *Pogo* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The series—a trilogy—is nearing its end, but it's not too late to catch up via the graphic novels.

Green Arrow
We cannot get enough of comics here at *CGW*, and stuff like *Green Arrow* is partly why. Resurrected by master scribe Kevin Smith in 2001, DC's Green Arrow character kicks serious ass. Check out the upcoming *Straight Shooter* trade paperback in April.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Mistmare	12/03	Just throw your $20 into the street instead	☆☆☆☆☆
Mysterious Journey II	3/04	For puzzle players who like pretty pictures, too	★★½☆☆
NASCAR Thunder 2004	3/04	Not bad, but we expect more	★★★½☆
NBA Live 2004	3/04	One of the best 5-on-5 games for any platform	★★★★½
Need for Speed Underground	3/04	Racing doesn't get much better unless you're in a real car	★★★★½
Neighbors From Hell	1/04	A fun way to spend a single afternoon	★★★½☆
Neverwinter Nights: Hordes of the Underdark	3/04	A five-star expansion sadly undone by bugs	★★★½☆
Neverwinter Nights: Shadows of Undrentide	9/03	A much better single-player game than the original game	★★★★☆
Nexagon: Deathmatch	11/03	Rock-paper-scissors is a more challenging strategy game	★★★★☆
NHL 2K4	1/04	The best NHL experience on virtual ice	★★★★★
No Man's Land	1/04	Another follow-the-numbers RTS	★★½☆☆
Nosferatu	2/04	Well, at least it sounds spooky	★½☆☆☆
Once Upon a Knight	2/04	A decent-enough RTS bogged down by a lame RPG and the mistaken belief that milk is funny	★★½☆☆
Patrician III	2/04	Little more than a glorified *Patrician II* patch	★★½☆☆
Pax Romana	3/04	A decent primer for *Rome: Total War*	★★½☆☆
Pirates of the Caribbean	11/03	Two half-good games don't equal one good one	★★☆☆☆
PlanetSide	9/03	Humankind's first persistent-world MMO shooter is surprisingly good	★★★★☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
PlanetSide: Core Combat	2/04	A decent idea at its core, but not worth the price	★★½☆☆
Railroad Tycoon 3	2/04	You don't have to love trains to enjoy the historical and economic challenges here—but a little train love won't hurt	★★★★½
Rebels Prison Escape	1/04	Go get a copy of *Commandos 2* instead	★½☆☆☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Red Faction II	9/03	Edged out only by *Wolverine* as worst console port so far this year	★★☆☆☆
Republic: The Revolution	12/03	Good idea, bad game	★★½☆☆
Runaway: A Road Adventure	12/03	The bimbo of graphic-adventure games: both pretty and stupid	★★☆☆☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Savage	1/04	A potential blockbuster marginalized by its own delivery	★★★½☆
Secret Weapons	3/04	If the combat didn't stink, it might have been cheesy, over-the-top fun	★★½☆☆
Silent Hill 3	3/04	In *SH3*, the only things that go bump in the night are klutzy monsters	★★☆☆☆
Sim City 4: Rush Hour	1/04	The new focus on transportation adds substantially to an already excellent game experience	★★★★☆
Space Colony	1/04	A clever combination of real-time strategy and *The Sims* isn't clever enough to hold your interest for long	★★½☆☆
Squad Assault: Western Front	3/04	"Better than *GI Combat*, like anchovies are better than lutefisk."	★★☆☆☆

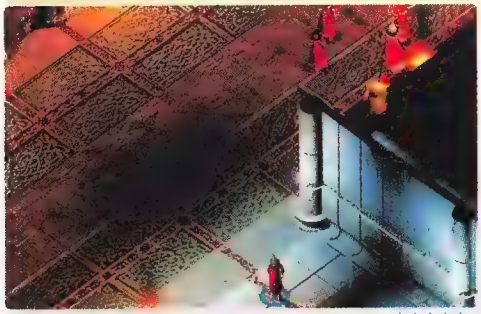
GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Star Fury	2/04	Open-ended and flexible without being too complex	★★★★☆
Star Trek: Elite Force II	9/03	Like playing one of the less-compelling TV episodes	★★★½☆
Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided	10/03	Might get a whole lot better	★★½☆☆

Villainously Bad

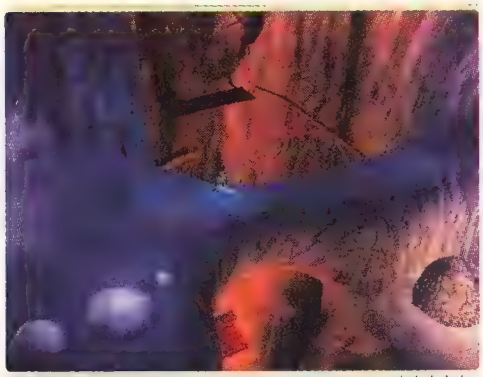
Metal Gear Solid 2
★★½☆☆
Ah, if only sequels were guaranteed to measure up to the originals. Even before the poor port to PC, *MGS2* enjoyed its share of criticism centered on both the new namby-pamby Raiden and the trippy plot.

X2: Wolverine's Revenge
★½☆☆☆
Hey, bub. You know what burns my hide worse than Sabretooth? When my good name is impinged with a crappy game. It puts me and my lawyers in a destructive rage! *SNIKT SNIKT* Graaah!

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Star Trek: Elite Force II	9/03	Like playing one of the less-compelling TV episodes	★★★½☆
Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided	10/03	Might get a whole lot better	★★½☆☆
Starsky & Hutch	1/04	The bad rep of the '70s continues with this crappy game from a crappy license	★★☆☆☆



GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Temple	1/04	Yet another good game marred by bugs. Wheeee!	★★½☆☆
The Elder Scrolls III: Bloodmoon	9/03	This solid expansion effectively increases the landmass of *Morrowind* to exceed that of Earth	★★★★☆
The Great Escape	11/03	Not quite as bad as a month in the cooler, but not much better, either	★★☆☆☆



GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
The Hobbit	2/04	Standard console fare, lightly Tolkien-flavored	★★☆☆☆
The Hulk	9/03	Best comic-book game—not named *Freedom Force*—you can buy	★★★★☆
The Simpsons: Hit & Run	2/04	The best *GTA3* rip-off ever, and a must-have for *Simpsons* fans	★★★★★
The Sims: Makin' Magic	1/04	The final *Sims* expansion plays like a charm	★★★★☆
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004	12/03	A game that will please both hardcore golf-sim addicts and casual gamers	★★★★★

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Titans of Steel	1/04	An old-school game with little crossover potential	★★½☆☆
Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness	10/03	Not as bad as the movie—oh wait, yes it is	★½☆☆☆
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4	12/03	As long as you have a gamepad, it's the most fun you can have on a skateboard without putting yourself in the hospital	★★★★☆
Tron 2.0	10/03	Best movie-licensed game of the year so far	★★★★½
UFO: Aftermath	1/04	*UFO: Aftermath* is a good game that should have waited three weeks and one big patch longer to be released	★★★☆☆
Uru	2/04	Some good puzzles, some bad action, no story, lots of familiar elements—maybe the eventual online content can make it more compelling	★★★☆☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Victoria	3/04	Good game, bad bugs.	★★★☆☆
War of the Ring	2/04	Good use of Middle-earth elements in a sadly mundane RTS	★★★☆☆
WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne	9/03	Some nice new stuff, but you pay in micromanagement	★★★★☆
Warlords IV	1/04	A strangely joyless version of a classic strategy franchise	★★☆☆☆
Warrior Kings: Battles	12/03	Good game, but it's a warm glass of milk when what you really want is a shot of your favorite poison	★★★★☆
Will Rock	11/03	To quote a Twisted Sister classic: "We're not gonna take it!"	★★★☆☆
World War II: Frontline Command	10/03	Bad interface, boring missions, and no realism, but the documentary footage is OK!	★★☆☆☆
X-2: The Threat	3/04	A much-deeper yet less-playable version of *Freelancer*	★★★★☆
X2: Wolverine's Revenge	9/03	Save your money and buy the *X-Men 2* DVD instead	★½☆☆☆
XIII	2/04	This Belgian import waffles between fun and frustration, excitement and tedium	★★★☆☆
Zero Hour	1/04	*C&C* better than it's ever been	★★★★☆

MP3 Players
Hard-drive-based roundup

iPod
A slick design, and a gigabyte boost from 10 to 15 on the low-end model, thanks to the iPod Mini's release. Some will gripe at the battery life, but when it comes to style, the iPod is truly second to none.

Dell DJ
A touch bigger and weightier than the iPod, but it sports rubber moldings, longer battery life, and a much more agreeable price to help incite competition among MP3 players. If only it was thinner and more streamlined.

Creative MuVo2
Why carry around 20 billion songs when a couple thousand will do just fine in a pinch? Available in 1.5GB and 4GB flavors and great for the gym, the MuVo2 is solid, and it doesn't look half bad, either.

Warlords IV: Heroes of Etheria
★★☆☆☆

Despite containing the word "heroes," *Warlords IV* fights on the side of darkness. Or rather, lameness. Suffice it to say, it's a backwards game that hasn't kept up with the times.

SuperPower
★☆☆☆☆

SuperPower isn't about teleportation or wielding powers. "Superpower" is in the context of countries with their vast militaries and governments. Too bad this statistic-heavy game about planet control is impoverished and weak.

Tom vs. Bruce

Two gamers enter, one gamer wins

DEVELOPER: **Nayantara Studios** GENRE: **Collectible Card Game** ESRB RATING: **None** REQUIRED: **300MHz Pentium or better, online connection, 8MB videocard, DirectX 8.1** RECOMMENDED: **A small investment for building your own deck** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet (2 players)**

Star Chamber

Bruce and Tom slap each other around with virtual cards

Tom grabs a surprisingly quick cultural victory on the Allocation map.

Q-3 Discovery allows Bruce to discover the kej-cruiser rush!

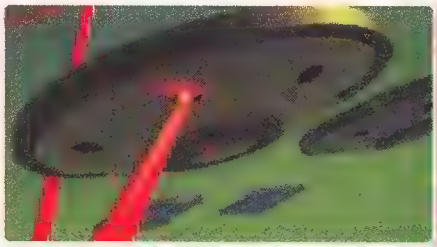
Star Chamber **(www.starchamber.net) is a cross between a collectible card game and a board game, playable online only. Tom and Bruce each used about $30 of cards to construct their own decks, which they pitted against each other in three matches played on randomly selected maps.**

Game 1

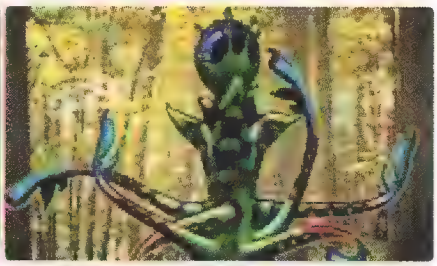
The first map is Allocation, which features four artifact planets, two industrial planets, and the Star Chamber, dividing the two homeworlds by a jump-five gateway. Two barren planets allow access to the planets closest to the opponent's homeworld.

Bruce: Ever since I saw George Clooney in *Solaris*, I've wanted to play a sci-fi game against Tom. Ideally, the game would be just like the movie: There would be pretty things to look at and whether I did anything or not, it would just keep going. We thought *X2: The Threat* was perfect—except it had no multiplayer. After concocting some crazy scheme to play the game in solo mode and compare scores at the end, Tom had to beg off when the hack he was using made him end up bankrupt. Instead, we're playing an abstract game in which you have to think really hard and aren't always sure what's going on. So I guess it's still a lot like *Solaris*.

Tom: First of all, it wasn't a hack. It was a no-CD crack. Thanks, Egosoft, for foiling my efforts not to have to hunt for the CD every time I want to do a quick energy-cell run at The Hole. Second, Bruce was happy to switch games because he was losing at *X2*. So, on to *Star Chamber.* One of the



The kej are robot bugs that can build fast cruisers. Actually, this one looks like a button.



The omior, a race of plants...or something.

victory conditions is amassing 30 Destiny points for a cultural victory. Destiny is a scale that reflects control of artifact planets, as well as heroic actions (i.e., you lose Destiny for playing certain "evil" cards). In this game, I'll be playing as the omior, a race of...I dunno, I guess they're supposed to be plants or something. Through some sort of karmic photosynthesis, they generate extra Destiny. My strategy is to quickly grab artifact planets and use my cards to speed up my Destiny income. In my initial draw, I get two druids, featherweight ships that can quickly grab artifact planets.

Bruce, turn 1: The kej are robot bugs that can build fast cruisers. In the game. For all I know, they may be something else in real life. I took an old kej ship deck that I'd used to frustrate Tom in a prior game and tried to make it better. At least, I was supposed to. Instead, I think I made it worse. With 80 cards, it's huuuge. I've totally diluted the useful cards with things that generate extra mana, called tech in this game. Instead of cool shields and armor cards, I'm holding three scientists. I hate scientists.

Tom, turn 6: A kej cruiser with aegis shields is bearing down on my homeworld. If it takes out my base, Bruce can win a military victory, so I channel all my production to build a cruiser and scout for defense. I play Power Broker on my lone-star chamber citizen. This will give him extra voting power when the Star Chamber meets him at the end of this turn. These sessions occur every six turns and allow players to bid on various bonuses, including the Power Play, which gives the winner his choice of a special card. Furthermore, if you win three Power Plays, you've won a political victory.

Tom, after turn 6: Bruce's cruiser was smashed into space dust. During the voting, my Power Brokered citizen took the Power Play. For my special card, I took Tip the Balance, which gives me control of a planet on which we tie for influence. My Citizen with Local Contacts won Alien Support, boosting my Destiny total to 24. My plants have serious political moxie.

Bruce, after turn 7: Tom cleverly manages to ferry a citizen to Zerian under the guns of my kej cruiser by using a scout with Infinity Drive, allowing it to withdraw from combat once it drops off its passengers.

Tom
Last month
Going retro in *Heroes of Might and Magic*, Tom's beer-esque druid, Coronius, sharted out.

Bruce
Last month
Tom's honorable surrender included stating: "Bruce Geryk is truly a hero of might and magic."

The last turn of the epic battle on the Backfield map.

Tom gains the support of the aliens!

This ties the amount of influence, but then his Tip the Balance card does just that. He also played a druid to blockade my lone artifact planet and speed up his Destiny rate even more. I've hopelessly misplayed this game. I have no choice but to try to win a military victory.

Tom, after turn 8: By pulling away all his ships to rush my base, Bruce completely abandons any attempt at contesting my Destiny income. The rush fails—kej cruisers may be faster, but their guns are weaker—and my omior vegetable men win a cultural victory. We will now let a thousand flowers bloom, so to speak.

Score: Tom 1, Bruce 0

Game 2

The second map is a Q-3 Discovery, an artifact planet between the two homeworlds, among a latticework of barren planets and asteroids. This core of systems is ringed with a long loop of additional planets.

Bruce, turn 1: That "improved" kej deck was a failed experiment. Bah—scientists! I've gone back to my old deck, and the luck of the draw has handed me the perfect map. All of my ships can reach Tom's homeworld in two turns. Time for a kej-cruiser rush!

Tom, turn 2: The silica are rock dudes whose ship hulls regenerate. This deck is built around buffing their ships into a powerful fighting force. Unfortunately, my initial draw was clogged with two flag ships and a carrier, which are really powerful and really expensive ships.

Bruce, turn 2: With the flexibility of Raise Shields, Repair Crew, Titanium Plating, and Regenerative Shields in my hand, I push a newly built cruiser up to Q-3.

Tom, turn 3: Bah, he can have Q-3. I'm sending scouts and citizens along the outer ring to grab artifact planets. This will improve my tech so I can use my flag ships and carrier to kick Bruce around the map.

Bruce, turn 3: I'm not going to bother capturing other planets or contesting the Star Chamber vote, since this will be over before the first vote happens.

Bruce, after turn 4: I won a military victory by capturing Tom's homeworld. All it required was two cruisers and a scout. Oh, and two citizens, which is all I needed for control after I wiped out Tom's base. Talk about maximum efficiency!

Tom, after turn 4: This is seriously lame. Seriously. I mean, come on! This is the lamest thing since blood-lusted ogres.

Score: Tom 1, Bruce 1

Game 3

Backfield has the players' homeworlds a two-jump and then a four-jump distance from the Star Chamber through a network of four artifacts and two industrial planets. Each homeworld has a local artifact and an industrial planet connected to the opponent's local planets via long treks past barren worlds.

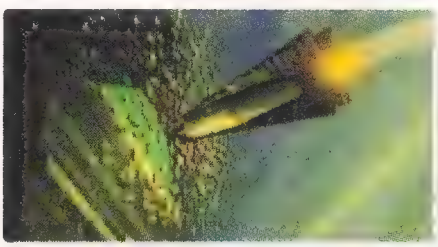
Bruce, turn 1
The ferrier are the intergalactic diplomats of deep space. This deck is going to take a long time to develop, because it's designed to win with a political victory while using Peacekeepers—the subcruisers you can win during Star Chamber sessions—to make up for its ship deficiency. The deck is full of stuff like Rhetoric, which gives you an influence bonus, and Archons, stationary diplomats who can be played directly to the Star Chamber. I'm the Dag Hammarskjold of space, only with a far-less-cool name.

Tom, turn 1
This time, I'm the zhikanii, a race of slugs with purple fringe. However, these are hardworking slugs, since their homeworld gets a production bonus. This far out from the Star Chamber—and with Bruce as the savvy ferrier—I have a political disadvantage. My deck is geared toward augmenting the ships I get from my increased production and then using mind tricks to counter any buffs Bruce might bring into play.

Tom, turn 2: I use a Brain Wipe to shut down Bruce's Rhetoric bonus at the Star Chamber. It's like George Bush getting up to address the United Nations and forgetting what he was going to say.
Tom, turn 3: I play Power Broker to give my

Bruce's Tartarian Gate breaks Tom's offensive.

It's late and Bruce keeps whining in the chat window about being sleepy.



A kej cruiser or a thorn flying through an oozing pimple?

I call this work *Shining Potato Against a Sea of Blue #5.*

Star Chamber citizen extra votes. At this point, Bruce can tie the Power Play vote, but I have the edge, a token used to break ties. If Bruce wants the Power Play—and I know he does—he'll be forced to move his only spare citizen to the Star Chamber.

Bruce, turn 4: My hand is being crowded with two Brain Wipes, cards that remove all modifications from a character. To make more room, I play one on my leader to remove Red Tape (a limitation on all starting leaders), reducing its effectiveness in battle.

Tom, after turn 4: He just wasted a Brain Wipe, which he could have used to undo my Power Broker! This worries me because it means he's obviously not bothered by the Power Broker. He's up to something.

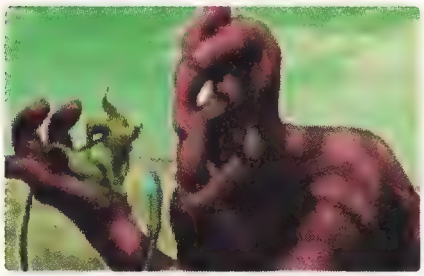
Bruce, turn 5: I move everyone to the Star Chamber. Tom threw a Confusion on one of my citizens to reduce my votes, but he's outnumbered no matter what he does. He managed to capture an extra industrial planet, but no matter—I'm all politics, baby!

Bruce, turn 6: I Brain Wipe Tom's Power Broker, play Rhetoric for an additional vote, and even manage to throw out an Economic Boom for extra Build points. Great turn!

Tom, after turn 6: I figured Bruce would care least about Alien Support, so I put all my votes there. I'm right. Bruce gets Power Play and the Peacekeeper. I get Alien Support for +4 Destiny. Big whoop.

Tom, turn 7: Bruce's navy is bigger than mine. To address my naval envy, I drop a War Factory on an industrial planet, which gives a production bonus but locks it into building cruisers. I strand Bruce's leader at the Star Chamber with Contentment—rendering his fleets leaderless gives me an edge during combat.

Tom, turn 8: I'm guessing Bruce is heading toward Volcanis, my homeworld. If so, I'm fine. I'll have more cruisers waiting, and I have a production lead, even though he just dropped a second Economic Boom on his industrial planet. My hardworking slugs and additional industrial planet will eventually outpace his short-lived booms.



I am going to hug you and squeeze you and call you George.

I am thinking...that I'm actually a man.

Tom, turn 9: He's got me boxed in with two forces coming at Volcanis from different directions. I can easily hold him back; my zhikanii warlock's leadership and the Alert Crew bonus for defenders gives +4 to each of my attacks, down to the lowliest cannon shot. He must be trying to split my fleet up.

Bruce, turn 10: Något gick fel! I got impatient and tried to end the game in one move by attacking Tom's homeworld. It worked before, right? Apparently, this time, there was something with the leaders, how they help you in combat and whatnot. I didn't watch the new *Battlestar Galactica*, so how should I know—it sure wasn't in *Solaris*.

Tom, turn 11: What a grand battle. You can re-create this battle at home! Take an egg to represent Bruce's fleet. Now go outside and find a brick wall to represent my fleet. Then throw the egg at the brick wall. That's what this battle was like. I'm moving my triumphant fleet toward the Star Chamber in time for the next turn's voting session. Now that his fleet is smashed, I'm tempted to simply attack his homeworld, but he might be able to rebuild before I get there.

Bruce, turn 12: At the Star Chamber, Tom has five votes to my eight. I need to win the Power Play and the Peacekeepers to rebuild my fleet. This will again leave Tom with Alien Support Destiny. He's very close to pulling off a cultural victory. Fortunately, I have the equivalent of an ace waiting up my sleeve: a card called Propaganda.

Tom, after turn 12: Bruce knows his only chance for victory is political, so I knew he'd go for Power Play. I let him have it, squandering six of his votes. This secures Alien Support for me, which will tilt the destiny balance even more in my favor. Since it's my second Alien Support, I get +8 Destiny this time. This gives me a total of 23 Destiny and actually puts me within a few turns of a cultural victory. "You love me," I tell the adoring aliens. "You really, really love me."

The aliens that used to love me are swayed so easily by one little card?

Tom, turn 14: If I were more conservative, I'd cluster my citizens on the Star Chamber in anticipation of keeping Bruce from securing a political victory with a third Power Play at the end of turn 18. But it's late, and Bruce keeps whining in the chat window about being sleepy. Fine, I'll just run around and grab the artifact planets for a quick cultural victory so that Bruce can lose and go to bed sooner.

Bruce, turn 14: There are a couple of ways to defend a homeworld: Use ships, or even cheaper, build lots of citizens so the enemy can't control the planet. I protect my homeworld by storing up Build points for citizens. In the long run, this is a losing strategy, but I'm trying to hold out until the vote on the 18th turn.

Tom, turn 15: I had a scout trying to slip past his homeworld to grab an artifact planet just beyond it. Bruce held it in place and destroyed it by playing a Tractor Beam. Where's the card that sends in Obi Wan to shut it down?

Bruce, turn 16: Tom's got me on the ropes with all the Destiny he's earning from artifact planets. Without a fleet, I can't contest them. But I can shut down his attempt at a cultural victory with Propaganda, a card that reduces his influence by one on every planet in the galaxy. *Every* planet in the galaxy. That goes for ones he doesn't own, too, so it puts him in the hole if he lands on any new planets. The effect lasts three turns, which takes us right through the final vote.

Tom, turn 17: Propaganda? What the hell kind of card is that? I drop from 24 Destiny to 14 in one turn. The aliens that used to love me are swayed so easily by one little card? Screw their hearts and minds! Time for the military victory! My fleet will reach Bruce's homeworld the same turn as the vote. A military victory trumps a political one, so I'll still win.

Tom, after turn 18: Suddenly, Bruce cranks out a boatload of citizens at his homeworld, depriving me of my military victory. Absolutely unfair! I smashed his base, so I should win regardless of how many sniveling citizens he has cowering on the planet below!

Bruce, after turn 18: Tom has six votes plus the tiebreaker. I have eight. I have to steady my mouse with both hands, but I successfully click on the Vote button without screwing anything up. Game over.

Final Score: Tom 1, Bruce 2

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Max Payne 2 Mod Contest Rules

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NO ENTRY FEE. NO PURCHASE OR OBLIGATION NECESSARY TO PLAY OR WIN.
Entry deadline is May 15, 2003.
Eligibility: The Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne Mod Contest is open worldwide to those age 18 or older, who have an active e-mail account and Internet access as of the beginning of the Promotion/Giveaway period. Employees of Sponsors and their respective parent companies, affiliates, subsidiaries, advertising, promotion, and fulfillment agencies, their immediate family members and persons living in their same household, are not eligible to participate in the Promotion/Giveaway. Participation in the Promotion/Giveaway constitutes entrant's full and unconditional agreement to and acceptance of these Official Rules & Regulations ("Official Rules"). **VOID WHERE PROHIBITED.**
To Enter: You may enter the Promotion/Giveaway by: Submitting your completed mod or trailer, along with required personal information, to our public ftp server according to the instructions on the contest page. Mods submitted via ftp without filling out the form on the main contest page will not be accepted. You may submit as many mods as you wish. As this is a skill-based contest, the odds of winning are not affected by multiple entries. All entries must conform to the End User License Agreement included with the retail release of Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne. **The maximum file size allowed is 65MB.**
Prize Drawing: All Promotion/Giveaway entries meeting the requirements of these Official Rules will be entered into the prize judging, to be held on or around May 30, 2003. The judging will be conducted by representatives of Rockstar Games, Remedy Entertainment, Computer Gaming World and Shacknews whose decisions are final and binding. The winners will be selected based on both technical merit as well as the subjective criteria listed on the description for each mod category. Winners will be notified by e-mail and/or telephone.
Prizes and Odds: The prizes to be awarded from the Promotion/Giveaway are as follows:
Best Original Mod: one (1) custom-built Max Payne 2 PC from Falcon Northwest and one (1) Max Payne 2 Prize Pack. Retail value approximately US $6,000.
Best New Dead Man Walking Level: one (1) ATI Radeon 9800 XT graphics card and one (1) Max Payne 2 Prize Pack. Retail value approximately US $500.
Best Real-Time Non-interactive Movie (Trailer): one (1) Logitech Cordless Desktop MX keyboard and mouse and one (1) Max Payne 2 Prize Pack. Retail value of approximately US $200.
The odds of winning depend on the total number of eligible entries received per category. Winners are solely responsible for any and all federal, state, provincial and local taxes that apply to prizes. No cash or other substitution of prizes is permitted. Sponsor will not replace any lost or stolen prizes. Approximate total value of all prizes to be awarded: US $7,500.
5. Notification of Winners: Winners will be notified by e-mail within five (5) business days of the final judging, and may be required to sign and return an affidavit of eligibility and publicity/liability release within five days of notification. If a selected Winner cannot be contacted after a reasonable attempt, is ineligible, fails to claim a prize and/or where applicable an affidavit of eligibility and publicity/liability release is not timely received, is incomplete or modified, prize may be forfeited and an alternate Winner will be selected from remaining valid, eligible entries timely submitted. In the event of a dispute regarding who submitted an entry, the entry will be deemed submitted by the authorized account holder of the e-mail account specified in the entry. "Authorized account holder" is defined as the natural person who is assigned to an e-mail address by an Internet access provider, online service provider, or other organization (e.g., business, educational institution, etc.) that is responsible for assigning e-mail addresses for the domain associated with the submitted e-mail address.
General Rules: By entering, you agree to be bound by these Official Rules. The Promotion/Giveaway is offered by Sponsor, Rockstar Games, 575 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, which is not responsible for late, lost, delayed, incomplete, or misdirected entries, responses, or other correspondence, whether by e-mail or postal mail or otherwise, or for theft or destruction or unauthorized access or alterations of entry materials, phone, electrical, network, computer, hardware, software program or transmission malfunctions, failures or difficulties. By participating and winning a prize, Winner releases Sponsor, its parent, affiliates, subsidiaries, directors, officers, employees, sponsors, and agents, including advertising and promotion agencies, from any and all liability with respect to the Promotion/Giveaway or the acceptance, possession or use of any prize, including without limitation (i) any condition caused by events beyond Sponsor's control that may cause the Promotion/Giveaway to be disrupted or corrupted; (ii) any injuries, losses, or damages (compensatory, direct, incidental, consequential or otherwise) of any kind arising in connection with or as a result of the prize, or acceptance, possession, or use of the prize, or from participation in the Promotion/Giveaway; and (iii) any printing or typographical errors in any materials associated with the Promotion/Giveaway. Sponsor's decisions in all respects relative to the Promotion/Giveaway are final. Sponsor reserves the right, in its sole discretion, to cancel, modify or suspend the Promotion/Giveaway in whole or in part, in the event of fraud, technical or other difficulties or if the integrity of the Promotion/Giveaway is compromised, without liability to the entrant. Sponsor reserves the right to disqualify any winner, as determined by Sponsor in its sole discretion. The winner is responsible for paying any income taxes on the value of the prize received. Void where prohibited or restricted by law. All federal, state, provincial and local regulations apply.
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Winner's List, Official Rules: For a list of prize winners or a copy of these Official Rules, send your request and a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne Mod Contest, Rockstar Games, 575 Broadway, New York, NY 10012 or (for Winner's list only) send an email message webmaster@rockstargames.com with "Winner's list" as the email subject and Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne Mod Contest specified in the body of the e-mail.
Sponsor's Address: Sponsor is Rockstar Games, 575 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

C'mon and Zuma, Zuma, Zoom!

Finally, a game that gets killer frogs right

"Curse thy black heart, thou incestuous amphibian! Oh bitter, bitter foe, my very soul is a-tremble with mine rage! I consign thee to the deepest, most foul pits of damned purgatory itself, where thou might wallow in the carnal debaucheries in which thou delight! You deserve no better fate, thou ignoble blackguard!"

That's what woke my wife up. Or, rather, to indulge in an atypical spate of honesty, it was the NC-17 version thereof that roused her from her slumber and brought her charging into our home office at 1 a.m. under the perfectly understandable misconception that I was in a pitched battle with hoodlums who had magically slipped in through the mail slot to murder our entire family.

Instead, she found me spraying huge gobs of spittle on my monitor as I fiercely cursed a cartoon stone frog. Embarrassing? You betcha. But educational, too. Finally, I knew what those "boxed his ears" references in my daughter's copy of *Little Men* were all about, and thus found myself flooded with a most poignant and unexpected feeling of sympathy for that Nate kid, so there was an upside.

But wholeheartedly relating to Reconstruction-era firebug orphans was about the only upside. Frankly, I am demoralized and dispirited, an even more broken and worthless shell of a man than usual. I have sold my soul to *Zuma Deluxe*, and I fear I shall never reclaim it.

You see, the good thing about this job is that people are forever giving me games. The bad thing about this job is that people are forever giving me games—and some of these games do a *Star Trek* boreworm brain-tunneling job on me, get in there nice and deep, grab my brain stem, and refuse to let go. That's what *Zuma Deluxe* has done to me. A seemingly benign little action-puzzler from PopCap, *Zuma Deluxe* is the single most destructive force ever to threaten mankind.

Some games do a *Star Trek* boreworm job on me, grab my brain stem, and refuse to let go.

Just in case you doubt me, this is a game from the same evil geniuses who almost wiped out this magazine twice before with insidious weapons of mass distraction called *Bejeweled* and *Bookworm*. This one is worse. How can a game in which an insanely grinning little stone frog spits colored balls at other colored balls be so addictive? I think it's maybe the 12-level adventure mode that gives you a tangible if unreachable goal beyond just racking up a high score. I've been failing stage 12 for every hour of the last few weeks now. I don't know the secret formula—PopCap does. All I know for sure is that when PopCap gets it right, it's just so wrong. So very, very wrong.

If only PopCap would harness its awesome powers for goodness instead of badness, the world would be a better place—at least, my world would be. I have never been so addicted to any game ever in my life, and I have been playing games since a roll of quarters and an arcade with *Pong* was the smart baby-sitter option.

I am attempting to salvage something from the wreckage of my life that has come courtesy of *Mr. Toad's Wild Cracklike Ride* by using the game to get my ear-boxing wife a new job. The plan is simple genius: Invest in a few licenses and e-mail them as gifts to the people holding the positions she desires, then give it a week. I guarantee their productivity will plummet like a lead-sheathed steel ball in a concrete brick shot from a nuclear-powered rocket cannon into the heart of a black hole. Then, she sends in her résumé and takes the position from their just-fired ass. The only real danger I think we face is if *Zuma* unleashes the full Ebola-grade horror percolating in each and every one of those brightly colored Aztec bocce balls and wipes out the entire company, but hey, nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?

That's pretty much my only hope for salvation, and let's be frank: At this point, I'm redefining "pathetic" and "desperation" every waking second of my life. Things have gotten so bad that I have developed idioglossia. "Dammit!" I'll shout at two in the morning, "I can't keep suturing like this all night! I gotta set some splits or gap the bank or I'm gonna misfire into a sad tumble!" This statement is generally followed by the aforementioned "sad tumble," whereupon I briefly rest my forehead upon my desk in an act of supplicating atonement before the stone frog that is both my devil and savior. Ignoring the inflamed throbbing in my knuckles and forearm from six and a half solid hours of mouse-clicking, I begin again. And my cruel deity, his freakish froggy face a soul-chilling rictus of triumph and joy, smiles as I succumb once again.

Robert Coffey robert_coffey@ziffdavis.com

ILLUSTRATION BY JON WAYSHAK

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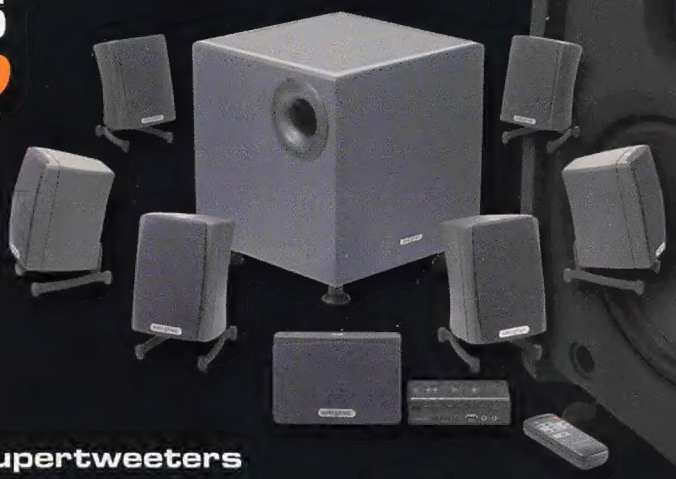

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